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JAN. 1950

REAL WESTERN ROMANCES

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JAN. 1950

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RENEGADE'S MOUNTAIN

FEATURE NOVELET

by Allan K. Echols

OUTLAW, RIDE FOR ME!

FEATURE NOVEL

by Eric Thornstein

A DOUBLE-ACTION MAGAZINE

ROMANCES OF THE RANGE

KILL THESE HAIR-DESTROYING GERMS WITH WARD'S FORMULA

NOTHING, *Absolutely nothing known to Science can do more to*

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FALLING HAIR
DANDRUFF
HEAD ODORS
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January 1950

Volume One

Number Two

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Here's a place to find pen pals.

★ *Robert W. Lowndes, Editor* ★

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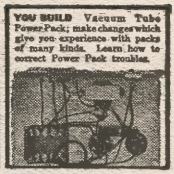

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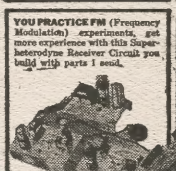

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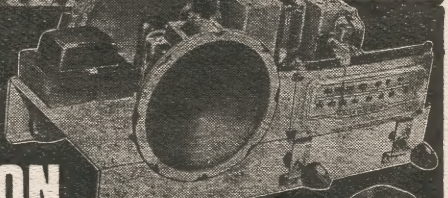

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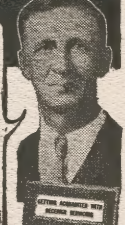

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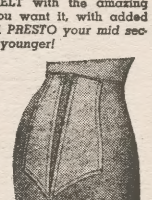

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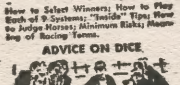

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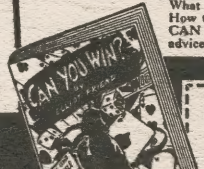

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Outlaw, Ride For Me!

FEATURE RANGELAND NOVEL

by ERIC THORSTEIN

She was alone with this hard-bitten, hard-riding band of hunted men, and she knew that there was little chance of any help coming. But if one of them could be persuaded to pull out of the gang, and go into town, send out the doctor Miranda needed . . .

It wasn't the Wilsons but a band of men she had never seen before . . .

MIRANDA gripped the porch-rail until the knuckles showed white against the red skin of her hands. She shut her eyes to the endless dust-grey of the prairie, and, pulling on the rail, leaned back into the refreshing stiffness of the evening breeze.

"I'm wicked." She directed the information at the retiring sun. "I'm vain and wicked."

She tried hard to think of Peter and Joey, tried to think of tonight's mending and tomorrow's wash, and this evening's supper. She pushed from her mind the desperate thought of the inaccessible doctor for Gilly. Then there was nothing left to think about but oatmeal.

She opened her eyes, and examined her hands ruefully, trying to remember how Mama's hands had always looked back home. If she had some time...and some oatmeal... but she had none of either. Inside the house Gilly coughed, the painful uncontrolled cough of a sick child. "I'm wicked," Miranda thought again dis-

mally, when even the cough didn't drive away the worry about her hands; resigning herself to the prospect of a sinful life, she started around the house to the kitchen door.

She had wanted Dad to build the porch in back, against the kitchen, so they could see the crick from it. But he had said, "When neighbors come, they'll build to face our front door. A porch is a very grand thing hereabouts, Randy, and you'll want to stand on it when you call across for a cup of sugar."

Neighbors! The friendliest neighbor in this grey country was the green-bordered stream that twisted out of sight a mile away, in back of the house. She stood there, staring out to the strip of green, but tonight the stream brought only lukewarm comfort, and the grim reminder of washday coming...and suppertime here. She turned back to the house, rough-hewn dark-grey on dust-grey.

"Joey!"

The boy scrambled to his feet. "I was only..." he started lamely.

"I thought you were watching Gil!" Miranda had a high voice, usually soft, but now, in anxiety almost shrill.

"I was oney settin fer a minnit before I git the cow. It's time to git..."

"Get! Sitting! Only! If I can't give you decent clothes and schooling, Josiah Hartsell, I can at least see to it you learn to speak English. You can't talk like western trash when we go back east, you know—not when you go to school. Now get along," her primness turned to laughter at the ridiculous transition, "and get the cow before she jumps the fence. I didn't realize it was so late."

Four-feet-two of blue jeans and brown skin went off in a small boy's erratic idea of a hurry. Back in the house, Miranda tried to hold on to her laughter long enough to offer a share of it to Gil. The four-year-old lay on her own wooden bedstead, the one that used to be Dad's, his small face as grey as the house, as the dust, as the homespun bedding. Three spots of color flashed from the interminable Oklahoma grey: the two round, incredibly blue bright eyes; the blue satin quilt that had stayed in the wagon when even the silver had to go. Dad had tossed over everything that made them heavier—and slower—in the race into the Territory for land, but Miranda had clung to the quilt.

THE BOY pushed the comforter from his chin, too old now to let his sister see him hugging its shiny warmth. He struggled a little with the effort, then managed to sit bolt upright.

"I'm not sick now, am I, Ranny?"

"You most certainly are! Under the covers now, before you get sicker still." Her cool hand on his head was a gentle pressure toward the relaxation of the pillow. "How about some fresh milk and biscuits when Joey gets back with the cow?"

"I'm not hungry."

"Golly, honey, you haven't had a bite in two days."

"I'm not *hungry*."

"Look," she struggled for the casual bright voice. His head was so hot. "Suppose we *all* eat in here?" She thought of the carrying and extra work, and resolutely removed the thought from her mind. "Won't that be fun?"

"No." He was petulant now. "I'm not hungry. I just want to get well."

"You will, honey. Just wait till the doctor comes." She picked up the damp cloth that had fallen off his head, and dipped it in the basin of cool water on the floor.

"Will Daddy come with him?"

"No, darling."

"Why?"

"Because Daddy's gone far away. We'll all go to meet him someday, but he can't come back at all."

"Is he dead?"

Joey told him! "Yes, Gilly, he is." She escaped further questions. "But the doctor *is* coming, and you have to stay as well as you can till he does."

"When?"

Bartlett was sitting in the doorway waiting, his gun drawn and ready . . .

Two days till Wilsons would come by the trail on their way from town. Two days after someone started back to town again for the doctor to come. *Two and two makes four. Joey could tell him that, too.* She wrung out the cloth, and laid it across the flushed forehead. "As soon as he can, darling."

SUPPER WAS A dreary affair. Joey kept picking on six-year-old Peter; Miranda more than once caught herself speaking too sharply to both of them. Nobody said anything about Gilly, and nobody stopped thinking about him, listening for the small protesting sounds that came fitfully from the child asleep in the room on the other side of the thin wall. Clearing away the dishes, Miranda knew she had to do something.

"Stand up there against the wall, both of you," she commanded the boys with all the gayety she could muster. "Hmmh—yes!" She added new pencil marks to two of the three rows of measurements along the doorframe.

"Yes, *what?*" from two eager mouths at once.

"Yes," she took the pencil out of her mouth. "Yes, you're big enough now." She went to the chest, the special one, with the few things from back east that were still left in it. Down at the very bottom, where she had put all Dad's things six months back, she found what she wanted. She straightened up, holding it behind her back, surveying the boys, who still stood stiff against the door that had proved them big enough.

"You're big enough, and I guess you're old enough, so..."

She produced the chessboard with a maximum of dramatic effect. Big and smart they were, certainly, but not big enough to know that the sparkle in her eyes was tears instead of laugher. Dad's chessboard...well, it was time the boys had it.

"Joey, you take the box of pieces, and read the instructions to Petey."

"May we play with it, really and truly?" Petey's grammar was flawless in wonder.

"Really and truly and for good. It's yours now, yours and Joey's. Now out of my way...scoot!" She flapped her apron at them, and began to gather up the last of the dishes.

The boys were deep in the two-directional problem of moving a knight, and Miranda was applying patches to an unbelievable heap of blue denim, when they heard the steady pound of hoof on dust that meant horses...and riders.

Miranda was at the door before the party of horsemen made the gate, smoothing her hair, pulling a shawl around her shoulders against the impact of the bitter prairies night, and thinking wistfully—and in the dark, certainly, quite irrelevantly—once more about the state of her hands and the oatmeal she didn't have. Maybe they'd brought some...

"Wilson?" Her call rang out in sheer r e l i e f. "Wilsons? You're early." She stumbled down the path, lanternless, to open the swinging gate. Her need was too urgent to wait for the questions that should have come first. "It's Gilly," she reported, as the first of the riders dismounted, "I need a doctor. I've *got* to have a doctor." The prospect of relief sent her voice sliding up a hysterical scale.

Then the man was on the ground facing her, and the face was a stranger's. "M'randa Hartsell?"

"Yes."

"Wal, Miz Hartsell, we heerd yore place was aout thisaway, an't seemed a likely place to spen' the night."

The thing in Miranda that kept turning to the thought of oatmeal reacted. "Won't you come in?" she managed, "You and your friends," and as they trooped toward the door, "I'm sorry to have greeted you as I did. I thought you were neighbors, and Gilly—my brother, the littlest one—is sick, you see."

SHE STOPPED, and waited for identification and an offer of

help. If there was nothing else to be said for this grey land, people at least were friendly; one of them would go for the doctor.

But the five men simply stamped through the open door while she stood there waiting. The foremost, the one who had faced her in the dark, turned as she closed the door behind her. His face, clearly outlined now in the lamplight, was long and angular. His home-cropped hair was black, too long and tangled, and his stubble too thick, even for a prairie rider; an almost childish mouth curved under a pirate's hook of a nose. His black eyes snapped with authority, and, as he surveyed the room, with decision. But he was not talking to her.

"Looks like this is it, boys." The statement was plural, but the direction of address was singular, aimed at the smallest member of the group, an even-featured man of middle age, with rich brown hair and rich red cheeks, already brushing the prairie dust from a fitted flowered vest.

The little man grunted an unintelligible phrase, too much occupied with his tidying to bother with words. But his agreement was cleared, and the other three men relaxed as though that settled the matter. The youngest, a boy of hardly more than fourteen, slumped into a chair in an admission of complete weariness.

"Where do we bunk?" The high clear voice reflected the unwilling tiredness in his face.

Miranda was turning from confusion to annoyance. She faced the tall hawknosed one with kid-gloved authority. "Won't you gentlemen give me your hats? Joey!" She turned to the oldest boy, who still sat by the chessboard near the fire, his eyes wide with delight at the uncommon visitation. His gaze had followed each of the strangers as they spoke, evaluating them in keeping with the standards of his eight years. He had already discarded both the youngster and the dapper little man as unworthy of his attention, and his eyes now were fastened unmovingly on the tall man with the crackling black eyes.

"Joey!" He transferred his attention to his sister with obvious effort. "Go out and get some water; our guests will want to wash. And," — turning from Hawk-nose to Redcheeks— "don't you think that your young friend here ought to get settled for the night?" She went on determinedly as the youngster half rose from his chair in as much indignation as his weariness would permit him. "I'm afraid you'll have to bed down in the barn. I'm alone here with the children and. . ."

"Yes," Hawk-nose cut in dryly, with a significance of tone too impersonal to be frightening, but strong enough to be more than puzzling, "We know that."

"Randa!" Joey was on his feet, his eyes traveling rapidly between the tall man and the small one. "Randa!" again. His tone demanded her attention.

"What ails you, boy?" There was something wrong with all of this. "I told you to get water. Now get it, and stop staring!"

"But *Randa!*"

"Joey!"

HE MOVED off reluctantly toward the leanto kitchen, his solemn wide eyes leaving behind a silence that was broken, finally, only by the gurgling of the pump.

"*Won't* you gentlemen let me have your hats and find seats for yourselves?" Miranda's tone was becoming strained.

"Why you-all are sure courteous, ma'am." The faint drawl was reminiscent more of the south than of rough western speech. She turned gratefully to the young man who had spoken. His beard, like the others', was long and unkempt, but his hair was neatly trimmed, and his clothes were the blue jeans and flannel shirt of her neighbors. His eyes were tired, and too wary, but his smile of pleasure and surprise was entirely genuine. His half-bow, as he pushed away from the wall where he had been lounging, to hand her his Stet-

son with a sweeping gesture, was enough to make her unstarched calico feel like hostess' silk. For just a moment, Miranda forgot completely about the everlasting grit in her hair, and the cracked skin on her once-white hands. She accepted the hat with a quick return of assurance.

"Randy!" The pump had stopped working. The voice from the kitchen was desperate.

"If you'll excuse me. . ." She escaped to the lean-to out of the scrutiny of the five pairs of too-anxious eyes. Joey's full pail of water was a surprise. "Well, why in the world..." she began, and then something in the boy's face stopped her.

"What's wrong, son?" A prudent instinct prompted her to sit down, while he pulled a well-worn piece of folded poster paper unhappily out of the back pocket of his faded overalls.

"You *told* me I couldn't have any" — the words tumbled out all of a rush— "but Todd Beacon brought it last time back from town when they stopped here four-five days back, and I *wanted* it. Please don't git riled, *please*, Randa."

"Get!" That was automatic. She paused with the sheet half-unfolded. "Why show it to me *now*, Joey?"

"Get," he repeated obediently. *"Look* at it, Randy please."

THE SHAPE of it was enough. She hardly wanted to read the words:

"WANTED!! WANTED!! WANTED!!

For Murder and Bank-Robbery

Jim Stark *Babe Bartlett"*

Below the names were the faces: Hawk-nose and Shorty Red-cheeks. *...held up Farmer's Bank in Carteret, Kansas, and shot, and fatally wounded, J. T. Carteret, the manager. These men are believed to be heading for Oklahoma, with three unindentified members of the gang. $500 reward, dead or alive.* The breath whistled in slowly through her teeth as Miranda let her hand, holding the sheet, fall onto her lap.

"Randa you're *not* mad at me?"

"Well, I certainly ought to be anyhow." Her head was bent over the paper. *It's just too much. It's more than even a grown woman could do. I wish, I wish just tonight I were a man.* "Oh, Joey!" she couldn't help it. "Joey, I wish Daddy was here."

She raised her head to see the tears welling in the boy's eyes, the sob forming on his mouth. Fear drained out of her as quickly as it had come. Joey's need filled her, and left no room for her own.

"Why, Joey, you big silly!" Her voice was so calm this time that it surprised both of them. "I do believe you're scared. Don't you think we can *use* $500?"

She kissed the tears away, a baby habit he would have resented any other time. "Now," she closed her hand around his on the bucket-handle. "We'll just go back in there and figure something out. And Joey," she added, just before they went through the door into the big room, "dont let on we know, and *don't* tell Peter or Gilly."

She swept into the room with laughter on her lips, and cold anger solidifying behind the mask on her face. Stark's crisp, *"We know that,"* took on meaning now. So they had come because there was no man; it was safe here with only a girl—a woman, she told herself angrily—and three small children. *There was a way. There was a way. There must be a way.*

Fear or fury would have defeated her. Icy resentment made success imperative and inevitable.

Chapter Two

MIRANDA had come to this strange grey land less than a year before, right after her mother died, with a father she loved enough to follow him into this desolation, when all the other children who were old enough chose to stay at home. She had chosen carefully, and brought with her all the

possessions that were dearest to her, things she had had from her mother for her own home, someday. One by one, the sun and storms of the weary trip, the grit and dust of the land, had stolen from her the most precious of her belongings; other things had gone in the mad race for claims when the Marshall's gun boomed to announce the opening of the Territory. Then a bullet at night, from one who had been less swift, had robbed her of her father, and, almost, of the land he had come so far to win.

She could have gone home, and let Jed Cummings have the claim he had stolen from her the most precious of her belongings; other things be protected from grief, because she could not let them feel her mourning, it had turned instead to cold determination. She would go back east, but not until the land was hers. The homestead law required only that she stay there and cultivate the quarter-section the government had given them for five years; she couldn't do much to improve it, not without a man, and there was no money even to hire a man. But they could raise enough to live on, and satisfy the letter of the law...once she disposed of Jed Cumming's claim to the land.

There were two lawyers already in the new town. She had gone to the one who seemed least dishonest, and accused Jed Cummings of her father's murder. The Judge in Federal Court had come up against the cold core of purpose in her; she had seen Cummings convicted, and the title-deed cleared. They had tried to tell her that no girl of eighteen could manage with three small children alone on the frontier. Maybe they were right, but she had come back anyhow, urged by the same chill resolve that had seen her through the trial.

NOW, BEHIND her pleasant face, the same icy purpose was once more acting for her. They had come because they thought they were safe, here in the house with a helpless girl and three children. Gilly was sick, and they would do nothing to aid him. She could not fight with guns and raw strength; she had her own weapons and she would use them.

"If you gentlemen would like to wash up," she set the bucket down, "I'll get some coffee for you, and go on out to the barn to make up some bedding."

"I reckon we'd be right happy," it was Hawk-nose—Stark— "a-sleepin' hyar in the house, Miz Hartsell."

She lowered her gaze demurely, and caught a glimpse of the Southerner in absorbed conversation with Petey over the chessboard. That settled it; the vague possibilities in her mind formed into a plan; it was important to get them out of the close quarters of the house. "I think you'd all be much more comfortable out in the barn," she stalled for time, thinking of the most effective way, and then for the first time since she had left home, she was glad for the grit and the hard work. It was clear that the men's interest in her was impersonal. She was, she reflected with just a tinge of wistfulness, quite safe.

"You'd be more comfortable," she went on, "and my mother always told me," —there was a flash from the corners of her eyes for this, and she was amazed at how easily the almost-forgotten tone of banter came— "that it was most improper for a single lady to share a house with five gentlemen." Her glance danced over them. "Five gentlemen, all so travel-worn, and so...anonymous."

It worked. A burst of male laughter shook the air, dispelled the slight tension. And under her lightness there was conviction. There was nothing suspicious in the determination of a well-brought-up girl to have the men out of the house, and they wanted to do nothing to arouse her suspicions, if they could help it. Miranda saw the two leaders exchange a brief look and a nod, the other three watching.

The one in jeans got up from his sober explanation of opening gambits

with Petey, and loosened his bandanna. "If I may avail mahself of yaw watah, ma'am, I'll be right happy to become un-anaonymous." Bartlett threw him a look of irritation, but it passed over his head without effect; this was her man then. "Mah name is Rawlings," he went on, "Leslie Rawlings. An' if I can be of any sehvice, I'll be glad to give you-all a hand out theh in the bahn."

He couldn't have done better if he'd known what she wanted. It was hard to keep her "Thank you," from sounding triumphant.

Out in the kitchen, she piled wood into the stove to heat coffee quickly, then dragged a chair to the tall cupboard, and reached to the back of the top-most shelf, where she had put the pills carefully away, out of reach of the children, after Dad died. The doctor had given them to her when he was in such pain from the wound in his chest, but Dad had refused to take anything that would lose him even a few brief moments of consciousness, when life was running out so fast.

There might be no reason for using them, she reflected, as she read the instructions on the little white box carefully...but it could do no harm...and the rest was up to Rawlings.

She dropped three tablets into the boiling coffee, set another fresh kettle of water on the stove, and carried the first steaming potful into the big room.

"If Mr. Rawlings will be so good as to escort me," she told Joey, "I'll go right on out, and you pour some coffee for the rest of our guests." *I'm not afraid,* her eyes told him, *and you're too big to be.*

GILLY HAD been restless while she was in the kitchen. Now, deliberately, she took Rawlings with her while she went into the bedroom for a shawl that she might have found as easily in the big room. She stopped to replace the damp cloth that had fallen off again, and the little boy opened one blue eye, turned in discomfort from the lantern the man carried, muttered a few words unintelligbly, and went off to sleep again, breathing with difficulty and unnaturally.

Miranda was watching him with concern, but she was watching Rawlings too. She had watched him with Petey, and had seen that he liked children; now she saw the hand on the lantern tighten, and his empty hand close into a tightly clenched fist. It wasn't much to go on, but it was something.

Outside, swinging the lantern thoughtfully as she showed him the way to the barn, he asked a little too casually, "What's wrong with the youngster, ma'am?"

"I don't know," she told him, and she didn't have to work at sounding worried. "He's been as hot as that for two days now, and I've tried everything I knew, but nothing helps. He just keeps coughing, and...well, I need the doctor, that's all."

He didn't answer. They walked the rest of the way to the barn in silence that was almost physically painful to Miranda. There were so many things she wanted to say; it would have been so easy to plead with this man, to beg him to help her. But she knew the best way was silence, and forced the words back as they came to her tongue.

Inside, she stopped to pat the cow, gave Lonesome, the bay filly, a handful of hay, and began to pull down great armloads of the sweet-smelling stuff from the low loft.

"We can fix up beds for three of you down here, and I guess one can get in on top of the hay up there, and I think if we move some of those things in the corner, we can manage one more..."

"Four'll do." He smiled as a blush began to creep along the line of her cheekbone. "No ma'am, it's just that we'll want to set a guard."

"Guard?"

"We always do."

"Why?" She dumped her straw on the earthen floor and faced him challengingly. "It's really quite safe. No Indians, and no really dangerous animals about. Only thing that'll

really get a man in this part of the country is a land feud, and you people aren't settlers."

"No." He was curt.

"Of course," she went on, apparently thinking aloud, "there are plenty of outlaws, but if we paid much attention to them, we'd never get a night's sleep. You know," she dropped onto the pile of straw, and picked up a piece, snapping it between her fingers as she talked, "we keep hearing about these holdups and bank robberies and I always wonder. How can the members of a gang like that trust each other? What makes them stick together?"

The man laughed abruptly. It was not a nice sound. "That's easy," he said shortly. "They're plumb afraid they'll hang apart." He dropped his load on the floor and sat down opposite her. "I've got a question of mah own, ma'am, beggin' yaw pahdon. What makes a girl like you stick it out in a goshforsaken place like this? What brings you-all here in the fi'st place?"

SHE SMILED. "Dad brought *me*. Mama died two years ago, and I guess he didn't feel much like staying at the old place. I think maybe he'd have come west long before if it weren't for her. She was so beautiful and...well there's no sense talking about her, but anyhow, Dad set his heart on coming when we heard about the Territory being open. We were here in time for the run. I came along to keep house for him and care for the boys."

"Nice boys," he said. "Kinda young to be your brothers, ain't they?"

"There are four girls in between," Miranda laughed. "Dad didn't think they were old enough to come out, but he just sort of took it for granted that the boys, being boys, would be all right." She thought of Gilly inside. "Of course, he didn't plan on...well, on leaving me with them by myself."

"It takes a lot of doin'," he said. "If I may say so, I do admiah you, ma'am, for stayin' out heah, when you could so easy go back east."

"Thank you," she said. "I admire anybody who has the courage to strike out for himself. Like what I was saying about the outlaws before." She got it out quickly now before his caution or hers could stop her. "Suppose, for instance, a band ...well, let's say like yours, just for example...suppose they were stranded out here this way, and let's say—" She couldn't look straight in his eyes any more. She lowered her head and spoke very slowly and softly, "Suppose they were all heading west, and just one of them decided to strike out for himself, and went back due east...what would stop him?"

"What makes you think, beggin' youah pahdon again, for I'm suah you don' know too much about these things, but what makes you think a man like that'd have a place to go back east? What d'you-all think makes a man join up with sech a band to staht with?"

MIRANDA cracked a piece of straw and the noise was like a thunder-clap in the overcharged atmosphere. She jumped up, and as he rose too, her face met his squarely. She saw the eyes, still wary and unrelaxed, and the mouth, not quite smiling, but crinkling a little at the corners. For long seconds, the accident of rising together kept their faces near, and she knew—and wondered how she knew—that he was going to kiss her. Then, within, the same few seconds, she realized that if he did, it would be because she wanted him to, and, finally, with combined relief and disappointment, that he wasn't going to do it at all.

Instead, he lifted her suddenly by the waist, as if she were so much thistledown, and held her high above his head.

"You can reach the straw easier that way," he said, and she could hear the smile, though she couldn't see it. But then his voice went almost completely serious. "And you can remember too, how high above me you-all are." He put her down

gently, very carefully, and reached for an armload of hay himself. For a few minutes they were both very busy, then Miranda turned around, and, this time avoiding his eyes, asked again, "You didn't tell me why it is one member of a gang wouldn't do just that: say, take his part of a big haul, and light out for himself."

"Why just that he don't get his part of the haul till he gets where they all goin'."

"But suppose. . ."

She stopped deliberately, and let the words hang in the air. It was up to him to go on now, or to change the subject. For a few minutes he worked in silence, and Miranda forced herself to keep busy too, as every passing second made it more certain that he wanted to hear no more. Finally he straightened up from the pile he had been shaping on the floor.

"Suppose what?" he asked.

She had to sit down. She couldn't have kept working and controlled her voice at the same time.

"Suppose," she started slowly, "just suppose, by doing a favor for a lady, this outlaw we were talking about could get his share—or as much as he thought his share ought to be—and head out for himself. Do you think he'd be tempted?"

"I think he'd be allmighty tempted." His eyes now were hard and cold. "Especially if th' lady were tryin' hard to tempt him. But I think he'd want to know a lot about jest how he was goin' to get that money, and jest what it was th' lady was afteh."

It was hard to sit still. Every muscle in her wanted to jump and run, and get away from this man. She forced down the panic, and finally she was able to speak again, but she made no attempt now to talk around the subject.

"I need a doctor," she said. "Gilly's awful sick, and I've *got* to have a doctor just as fast as I can." She got up and crossed the barn slowly, and let him wait to hear the rest while she led Lonesome out of his stanchion, and up to the barn door. The bay hesitated, whinnied questioningly at the unaccustomed freedom. Miranda gave him a sharp rap on the rump, and sent him flying.

"Night pasture," she explained briefly, "down by the crick back of the house." Then, as if the thought had just occurred to her. "Funny isn't it, anybody who wanted to leave here tonight could do it pretty quietly, with the horse already out."

"A man don't like to leave his friends when he's empty-handed," he said, his mouth tight under the shrewd eyes, then added pointedly, "We've got the four beds made up now, and that's all we need."

THEY WALKED back to the house in silence, while Miranda tried to decide how much it was safe to tell him. She had gone this far...

"I think that coffee is going to make your friends awfully sleepy," she said, as they reached the house.

She couldn't see his face, and he made no answer. Inside, she found she didn't dare look at his face, for fear she would find the wrong answer there. Gilly's sudden sharp cough gave her an escape. She ran into the bedroom, and stood there helplessly, looking down at the tormented child. She sensed Rawlings' presence without hearing him enter, but she wouldn't turn, still, to meet his eyes. His voice was unexpectedly soft when he spoke.

"I shouldn't have had to pick you up befaw," he said. "You shouldn't have tried to tempt me *that* way."

Hastily, because there had to be something to do while she found words to answer him, she took the cloth from Gilly's head, and dipped it again, unnecessarily, in the basin. She stood up, wringing out the cloth, and turned to face him. *Let him think it was on purpose. Let him think anything except what really happened.*

"I'd do *anything*," she told him earnestly, "to get that doctor," and knew she meant it.

Miranda felt wild hope solidify into the possibility of achieving her goal, as, for the first time, she saw the hardness go out of his eyes. It was only for a minute, but it was long enough. Hysteria found voice in laughter as she noticed the cloth in her hands.

She giggled, adding almost anaudibly, "...and some oatmeal," and then escaped to the kitchen before she had to explain.

She filled the big coffee pot with fresh water, rinsing it out carefully, and went back to the big room, her self-possession no longer completely assumed. *There is a chance. There's just a chance.*

Chapter Three

THE FOUR men were sprawled comfortably in front of the fire, the youngest already asleep, with Petey beside him on his elbows, literally propping his eyelids up with his fingertips. Miranda realized with a shock that it was close to midnight.

"Petey! Joey! I don't know what's wrong with me, letting you stay up like this. Go on now, both of you, and I'll be up in a minute to see you're tucked in."

Two mouths opened in automatic protest, and closed again in sheer weariness. The boys lifted themselves up the rungs of the ladder that led to the tiny garret, and a nervous silence fell, as Miranda was left alone with the five men for the first time.

Stark had been talking quietly with Rawlings in a corner. Now it was the hawknosed one who broke the silence. His slow voice drawled what should have been a casual question, while Miranda stood in tortured uncertainty of what had passed between the two men.

"It jes' naow come upon me, Miz Hartsell," he was saying, "that we mought be puttin' you aout some. Seem like you was expectin' some folks? I recollect, aout that at the gate, you greeted us like you knew we was a-comin?"

"The Wilsons?" There was no telling yet how much Rawlings had said. "I'm not expecting them for two days yet. I was just so worried about the boy," she motioned toward the bedroom, "that I didn't stop to think they couldn't possibly be coming this soon. You're not a bit of trouble, I assure you." *They can't go now. They can't. Not now when there's even a little chance!*

"Then ef'n ever'thin's ready, we'll be a-goin' on aout, Miz Hartsell." It was all she could to keep from flashing a look of pure gratitude to Leslie Rawlings. Whatever he was going to do, at least he hadn't told them that she knew. It was up to her, now, to keep being convincing.

"Can I offer you a bite to eat before you go?" She favored Hawknose with a carefully maternal glance. "Riding all day you must be hungry."

Stark looked around for confirmation from the others, and started to nod assent. Bartlett forestalled him.

The little man turned from the fire, his cheeks rosier than ever with the heat, and fixed on her a look almost too piercing to have come from those bland eyes. She noticed he had shaved, the only one who had. He was as spotlessly, meticulously neat, after the day's ride, as though he had never seen a saddle-horse or a prairie. He would be a hard man to deceive.

"You're being very kind, Miss Hartsell." His speech was as precise as the part in his hair. He *had* to have a blind spot somewhere; there had to be *some* way to convince him. There was.

She turned to Leslie, enlarging on his faint drawl with calculated coquetry. "Ahm suah you-all'd lak somethin' t'eat, Mistah Rawlin's?" It answered Bartlett's question. She watched his lips turn up at the edges with amused understanding, his eyes go bland again with assumed discretion. Leslie returned the obvious attention with a mocking half-bow, and she dipped barely-discernable curtsey in reply, then turned to Bartlett.

"We don't have company very often, and it gets lonesome out here," she began, and then the temptation

to needle the dapper little man became irresistible. "If you gentlemen are traveling a long way, and find it to your pleasure here," she added, "I'm sure you're welcome to stay an extra day and rest your animals. I won't need the space out there till the Wilsons come, and you might want to stay till they come along with news from town...?"

THEY MADE a party of it. Miranda surprised herself. The chill determination did not warm under the pleasantry, but all around that core of cold purpose, she relaxed. A midnight party with five desperadoes has its points.

When, finally, they went off to the barn, Miranda tiptoed into Gilly's room, to find him lying wide-eyed and quiet under the satin covering.

"Why, honey, why didn't you call me when you woke up?"

His smile sparked white happiness across the grey face.

"You were *laughing*, Ranny, you were laughing so *much*." His words trickled out. Miranda sat down quietly, and stroked his head where the cloth had come off again. "I *like* it when you laugh, Ranny." Silence again, and then, "I mean when you *really* laugh, like Joey and Petey."

I used to laugh, she thought. *I used to laugh a lot. Is this what happens when you grow up?* She picked up the cloth and replaced on the hot forehead. "I had something to laugh about," she smiled at him now.

"What? What is it Ranny?"

"What? Why...well, I guess just the company." *Leslie, Leslie, Leslie. Leslie is going to get the doctor. Maybe.* "It was fun."

"Is there comp'ny?"

"Oh my goodness!" She got up, and began straightening the covers. "You didn't even know, did you? They came in to see you, at least Le..Mr. Rawlings did. But you were sleeping." She gave the cover a last pat. "Don't worry, darling, you'll see them in the morning." *But not Leslie. Let Leslie be gone in the morning.*

From the chest at the foot of the bedstead, she got a featherbed, and spread it out on the floor. Then she blew out the candle, and lay down, fully clothed, forced herself to lie quiet till Gil was asleep. The mattress was lumpy and uncomfortable, and she wondered why she had never realized it before. She twisted and wriggled for comfort, found none, and made herself lie still in the dark, and try to sleep.

A window would be nice. She thought of the houses with windows back home. The clock in the kitchen ticked endlessly, noisily, each tick louder than the last, while every nerve in her body cried to get up, and she thought how nice a window would be.

For a long time, she lay there, and then there was a noise outside, faint but distinguishable, and she could stay still no longer. She crept through the dark to the kitchen, and opened the back door as much as she dared. She heard the noise again, and her eyes swiveled anxiously in the direction of the sound, while the moon floated, with majestic indifference, behind a passing cloud. As long as caution permitted, she stayed at the door, straining to see what the gentle slope that led to the crick refused to reveal.

PRAIRIE morning came early and brilliant. Outdoors, the blazing white sun evoked pinpoints of reflected glory even from the Oklahoma dust. In the room where Gilly slept, the dustgrey of the walls still matched the dullgrey of his face. Miranda was out of the house as soon as she woke. By now, everything had certainly gone all wrong. They might be gone already...

It was quiet, too quiet outside. They *had* gone.

Fifty feet from the barn, she came to an abrupt halt in sheer amusement at the effectiveness of her work. Bartlett was sitting in the wide doorway, gun in hand, from the neck down the picture of an alert guard. A polite, reedy sort of sound, not quite a snore, came from his half-open mouth. His chin hung on his

flowered vest and his neatly cut hair fell in a straight swath over one closed eye.

Miranda turned back to the house, giggling a little at the thought of the others waking to find the precise little man in this ridiculous position. But halfway back, she stopped in thought. It was too bad to have to spoil it, but if Rawlings *had* gone, it might be better for Bartlett to be up before the rest. It wouldn't come easy to him, admitting he'd gone to sleep on watch; let him figure out a story to tell them. *And let Leslie be gone. Please, please, let Leslie be gone.*

She got Joey out of bed without waking Pete, and gave the little boy exact instructions. He puffed visibly with importance, and streaked off to the barn.

Miranda should have stayed in the house, but she couldn't. From the front porch there was a clear view of the barn door, and she stepped out just in time to see Joey raise his slingshot with deadly eight-year-old accuracy. The flight of the tiny pebble was invisible from that distance, but she saw Bartlett slap, with a hand that woke as it moved, at that tender spot behind the ear that is so alluring to small insects. Before the man's eyes had opened, Joey had dashed to cover behind the side of the barn, and seconds later Miranda herself was in the kitchen, listening alertly for the sounds that might tell her what she didn't dare step outside to see.

Voices carried clearly across the level distance. She heard Joey, after a time that allowed him to circumambulate the barn with a wide sweep, greet the cow with his usual hearty, "Hey, Bo-o-oss." Miranda smiled at his conscious imitation of himself. Then there was an exchange, audible, but too low-toned to make out individual words, between the man and the boy. Finally, footsteps, too heavy to be Joey's, came up outside the kitchen door.

Bartlett greeted her in his curiously precise diction, "Good morning, Miss Hartsell, I wonder if I could trouble you for a cup of your fine coffee?"

"Come right in and sit down. Did you sleep well?" She knew she was bustling a little too much, and made herself slow down.

"I stood watch." He was a little stiff, only a little suspicious. Miranda brought two cups, and sat down opposite him, waiting. *Maybe he doesn't know yet himself,* she was thinking. *Maybe I won't find out till the others wake up.*

"I see Rawlings is up and about early this morning..." He let it drift off, halfway between statement and query, hardly aware that what he had given was an answer to Miranda's unspoken question.

Her hand trembled slightly, and the coffee began to shake. She put the cup down hastily.

"Oh?" she said. *Careful, careful, there's nothing for you to sound happy about.*

But if her voice didn't show it, her eyes must have. Bartlett's gaze was at once pleading and accusing.

"Miss Hartsell," he began briskly, "Leslie Rawlings is a very charming man. It is easy to understand the position of a lonely young woman. You seem a sensible sort of person. As it happens, I was on watch this morning." He wanted that point firmly established, "and saw my friend come up this way. So let us not be foolish or coy."

HE SET his coffee cup down with emphasis. "Mr. Rawlings is about?"

"No."

"Miss Hartsell, *please.*"

Miranda didn't have to work at the blush, nor at being offended, but it was difficult to mix in the note of regret that she knew was necessary. "No," she said again, and allowed her glance to wander from her hands to the piece of mirror over the pump. "No, I haven't seen Mr. Rawlings, I'm afraid. Perhaps he's gone for a walk?"

The notion of a pleasure stroll in the Oklahoma sun was so patently

absurd that a forced laugh was quite all right. Miranda stood up, then turned back swiftly to face Bartlett.

"He hasn't gone away, has he?" She realized how much like disguised regret disguised pleasure could sound.

"I hope *not*," the man answered grimly. "At any rate, his horse is still here." He finished his coffee with an uncharacteristic gulp and strode, in so far as such a dapper little man could stride, out of the house.

Miranda had plenty to keep her busy. She sorted out dirty clothes, and set a kettle full of lard, fat, and ashes on the stove to melt down for soap. The memory of scrubbing boards, soap bars, and stone tubs back east made her reflect bitterly that the simple effort of keeping in clean clothes in this dustland was enough to take any woman's mind off romance and banditry both.

By the time she had clothes, soap, and water, steaming in one great kettle on the stove, the two anonymous desperadoes had been in for coffee, and gone without another word about the missing member of the party.

Bartlett came in again, this time with Stark, while she was trying to interest Gil in some gruel. The baby's head was hotter than ever. His blue eyes were so bright that she kept her own gaze fixed on his lips, afraid of what she might see in the feverish stare. *He has to get the doctor*, her mind kept saying, *he just has to get the doctor. I can't wait for Wilsons, he has to get the doctor.*

"Miz Hartsell?" It was Stark's rough western voice calling from the kitchen.

"In here."

The hawknosed man appeared in the doorway, the smaller Bartlett almost hidden in his rear by his bulk and wide stance.

"I hear tell you claim you ain't seen nothin' of young Rawlin's," he started, then stopped abashed, as her voice undercut his with a tender softness the outlaw had not heard in many years.

"Look, Gilly, look," her tone had the singsong of a family refrain. "The spoon is made of darling, and the gruel's cooked with dear, and it's all tied up with love, and" she paused dramatically, "it's got *sugar* in it. *Real* sugar."

The boy made a weak attempt at interest. He closed his lips a little around the spoon as she nudged it against his mouth, but his tongue declined to participate. He waited patiently, without protest or interest, till she removed the spoon, then closed his lips a little more to lick the spot of cereal into his mouth.

"No more." He was decisive in spite of his weakness.

The small voice broke the spell, but Stark's swagger had departed when he spoke again. "I'm right sorry to trouble yew, Miz Hartsell, but we're downright consarned abaout young Rawlin's."

Chapter Four

MIRANDA rose with dignity. "I've already told your friend here that I haven't seen him since last night. Now if you'll excuse me..."

He backed away from the door automatically as she swept by. Both men stood awkwardly, unable to introduce the subject again. When someone finally did speak, it was Miranda.

"Would you mind," she addressed Stark, obviously the stronger of the two, "helping me carry this pot out...Right here," she directed, "near the stump."

He set the pot down, absorbing a generous portion of moist air redolent with the peculiar aroma of hot wash. Miranda dismissed him with a small thank-you, and began fishing out pieces of clothing with the peeled forked branch she kept for that purpose. She laid out the first pair of overalls on the stump, carefully, so the buttons would be safe. Joey, who lived for washdays, appeared from the limbo small boys vanish into, carrying the heavy mallet, and began pounding enthusiastically. Miranda stayed just long

enough to make sure his energy was directed at getting the soapy water through the cloth, rather than the clothes on the ground, and then walked off, leaving Stark to stare at Joey, or return to barn.

Bartlett was still in the kitchen, sitting at the table thoughtfully. He stayed there, his eyes following hers, between carefully casual remarks and rejoinders. Miranda saw to it that her awareness of the tense situation centering around the empty pile of bedding in the barn did not show in her movements. There was, after all, a day's work to be done, and even the discerning Bartlett was eventually convinced that the only secrets in this woman's mind were her favorite recipes. When she went out again to check on the progress of the laundry, he left, too, and went on to the barn to join the knot of men who stood at the door in aimless discussion.

She was helping Joey to finish the last of the pounding when a sudden flurry of activity among the men made it clear they had finally discovered there was more missing than Rawlings himself. She congratulated herself on helping Bartlett to cover up his dereliction of duty when she heard his flat tones reiterating, "Certainly I saw him go. He went up to the house. I saw him go in. He was not carrying anything. And I am not blind."

Stark's answer was prolonged and profane. Miranda stopped listening and started hustling Joey. She got the clothes into the basket, invented an errand for Joey in the house, and paced over to the barn in a fury she did not have to feign.

"I don't know what you gentlemen are, nor what your names are, where you come from, nor what your business here is." She was haughty as a schoolteacher with a group of bad boys. "You asked shelter for the night, and I gave it. Apparently one of your friends has abandoned you, and I may say he was probably showing good sense removing the likes of himself from the likes of you. But while you're in my house, or on my land, you'll kindly refrain from using that sort of language in front of the children, *or* in front of me."

THE ATTACK was totally unexpected. She utilized the stunned silence to improve her advantage by stepping a few paces off before she turned back to add, "I'm going down to the crick to rinse out my clothes. My brother Petey'll be here with the baby, and I expect you'll refrain from disturbing them?"

She lifted the wicker clothesbasket with both hands, her slender back bending against the weight of it, one arm close to her body, the other a graceful curve to the handle at the other end. Four pairs of eyes followed her movement, and the same thought struck four minds at once. Bartlett came forward immediately.

"It is a long walk to the creek, Miss Hartsell. May I help you with your basket?"

"I thought you'd be moving on about now," she answered pointedly.

"We have been considering your kind invitation of last night, and thought, in view of Mr. Rawling's strange disappearance, we might like to stay on another day. I can promise you, Miss Hartsell," he added, turning to give Stark a look that in itself made good the promise, "that there will be no repitition of this... unfortunate incident. But we should hate to go on without our friend."

Miranda managed not to smile at the meaning packed into his noncommital words. "Oh," she seemed to consider. "Well, I'll be glad of your help in that case."

He was just a little taken aback. Clearly, he had hoped for some resistance on her part. If she had what he was looking for, she would not be anxious for his company. He tried once more, as he took one handle of the basket.

"It is a little disturbing, you see, to find Rawling's horse still here, when he himself is gone. I have been wondering, though, I hate to make the suggestion about a friend of mine..." he paused as if in delicacy. "There are two stalls in your barn, Miss Hartsell, and only one horse. You...?"

She was grateful for Joey running ahead, out of earshot. "We sold Lonesome last month," she lied glibly. "You see, when Dad died... well, I can do most of the work around here, but I need to hire a man once in a while for the heavy labor, and the only way to get cash is by selling something. I'm sure Mr. Rawlings can't have gone very far." Miranda saw no reason to help clear up any part of the mystery for them.

He was silent the rest of the way, and she kept the silence except once, when she called Joey to come and take her side of the basket. Talk of the horse had struck her with a sudden fear. Slowly, forcing herself not to make her reason apparent, she drifted ahead of the others, watching every foot of the ground for hoof-marks. But the dust was fine and dry, and even their footsteps disappeared as they walked.

BARTLETT waited till she had set the basket down at the crick, and started rinsing the clothes. Then he chose a spot in the meager shade of the bushes, where he could sit and watch with a clear view into the basket. Her lack of concern was so apparent that there was small disappointment for him when she reached the bottom, and no pile of bank notes had appeared. Miranda handed the last piece of clothing to Joey, and was struck at the same time by the fact that, had she had the money, she could have hidden it right under the man's eyes by wrapping it beforehand inside a piece of wash, and dropping it safely on the rocks while she rinsed. The notion, in the strained atmosphere, was so funny she couldn't quite contain herself.

She laughed aloud, and turning to survey Joey's work, found an excuse for laughter, in the way he had hung the clothes. The boy had a private game, arranging the arms and legs of shirts and pants on the greenery of the bushes where they were put to dry, according to his fancy. This time the results were obscure, but the twisted limbs of the clothes were always funny.

Bartlett was not inclined to join in the gayety. Teasing, Miranda urged him to look at Joey's handiwork, but he started back without another word, sunk in his none-too-happy thoughts.

She got through the rest of the day without interference. The men stayed out at the barn, doing nothing, sitting and watching, waiting, holding periodic conferences, and apparently unable to decide on any immediate course of action. About midday, the youngest of them mounted his horse, and went off in search of the thieves' thief. Miranda watched anxiously till she saw him head off up the trail, away from town. Of course, they dared not go back themselves, and could not imagine that Rawlings had. The rest of them made no trouble. They trooped in for meals, when she sent Joey or Peter to call them, and left again, no longer maintaining even a decent semblance of the traditional courtesy of the west, but not quite daring, either, to be openly impolite.

Evening and its cool breezes, tonight, brought no relief from anxiety, except for Miranda, who stood on the small porch Dad had added so proudly to the house, and thought, *A single man riding alone can go fast. He could be there by now. The doctor could be on his way back.* She saw the youngster who had gone out during the day turn back in through the gate, and laughed a little softly to herself.

Then from the house came Gilly's waking cry. He had slept fitfully through the afternoon, the sleep of fever and weakness. He would eat nothing at all now, and could barely talk. Miranda sat with him through the night, watching the pale face toss on the pale pillow, as he slept and woke, and dreamed sick dreams in a half-awake daze. She sat there, hating the endless greyness, and making herself see it, feel it, face it, till finally, symbolically, she covered even the blue quilt with a grey sheet, its bright color an offense now against the grim reality of Gilly's

struggle with sickness and possibly death.

Maybe they've started back already. Maybe the doctor's on his way. His horse is fast. Both horses are fast. A man alone on a fast horse could ride it in fifteen hours, each way. *Fifteen and fifteen is thirty. The doctor can come at dawn.*

Not until the light began to creep in through the open door in the morning did she let herself face the last reality: *If he got the doctor, if he bothered to get the doctor at all.*

WITH THE dawn, Gilly fell at last into a sound sleep. Miranda must have nodded herself, sitting there on the bed, because the shot rang in her ears without warning. But if she had slept, she was awake before the sound had died away. She scooped Gilly up in his blankets, and rolled under the bed, holding him close, calling at the same time to the boys upstairs, as loud as she could shout, to stay where they were.

She never knew how long she stayed there. Gilly woke, wailing, from his sleep, and Miranda knew only that she lay there on her back, cradling him on her bosom, fantastically singing an old song of her childhood to him, against the crashing background of gunfire. She could hear her own voice as it must sound to Gilly, calm and serene, negating all the terror of the sudden move to the floor, of the furious shooting outside.

Then there were footsteps in the kitchen, and she stopped singing, *heard* the silence around the footsteps, and then the voice, a familiar voice, calling "Randa?"

"Wilson! Dick Wilson!"

She tried to get out from under the wooden frame of the bedstead, and found she couldn't move without hurting Gil. "Dick," she called, laughing uncontrollably at the foolishness of it, now that all the danger was past, "I'm here, under the bed."

Between them, they got Gilly back between the sheets, and then she turned eagerly to her neighbor. Dick Wilson's heavy grey-haired solidity had never been so comforting as it was now.

"Dick, how did you get here so soon? Do you...you didn't by any chance see Doc Steuer? You don't know whether...?" She stopped, her question answered by the shape that filled the doorway.

The doctor held up bloodstained hands. "Had to fix up them varmints afore they bled to death and cheated the law of what oughter be a sheer pleasure to the sheriff," he explained. "If you'll git me a pan o' water to wash in, M'randy, I'll take a look at th' young 'un right off."

The grizzled old man took it all in his stride so naturally that Miranda moved automatically to comply with his request before she began to wonder again about everything that had happened.

Wilson led her into the big room in front while the doctor looked at Gilly. He settled down with a sigh in front of the fire.

"You shore do keep folks busy, Randa," he grumbled. "Allus said a woman alone had no place aout here." It was an old joke. When the whole town and countryside was against her staying, the Wilsons had stood by her. He watched her face light up, first with humor, then with curiosity, and went on, "Jes' contain your .tarnal curiosity, an' you'll git all the facts yore female mind kin want..." He poked the log into a blaze. "Met a feller..."

"Ranny...Ranny is it all right to come down now?" It was Joey, his tousled head poking over the ladd r.

"Sure thing, boy, the shootin's all over," Wilson called up to him.

JOEY TUMBLED down two rungs at a time, with Pete right after him. The older boy, ignoring Miranda, went straight to the man.

"Did you see it, sure enough? Did you get 'em all?"

"Oh it wuz you did it?" Wilson asked, smiling. He winked at Miranda. "Shoulda known better than to give a woman credit fer a piece o' smart thinkin' like that."

Miranda looked from one to the other, dazed. Things didn't seem to be getting much simpler. "Know whut this boy done?" Wilson was asking her. She shook her head slightly.

"Wa'al, he went and hung out them clean clothes yore allus makin' sech a fuss abaout, and fixed 'em so's they'd spell OUTLAWS, so's we'd knaow as we come ridin' in."

"An you come in shootin', like I thought," Joey broke in, almost bursting with self-importance. "Bet you wuz scairt when you heard the shootin', Ranny, but *I* knew what it was."

"*Came*, Joey, and *scared*." He gestured impatiently, indignant at corrections now that he had proved his manhood. "Gosh-all finnikins!" he exclaimed, as mighty an oath as he could bring to mind. "You sure gave me a bad minute when you kept tryin' to git that feller to look at them clothes." Miranda opened her mouth to correct him, and shut it again, as Wilson gave her a stern look. This was no time.

"You mean," she managed, "that you actually thought of that all by yourself? It never occurred to me they could see the bushes from the trail."

"I knew that all along," Joey told her. "Petey and me, we allus play that way, when we play outlaws, that one of us warns the sheriff by puttin' some kind of a sign on the bushes. You kin see 'em clear from the trail, an' you kaint see a thing from the house."

That was going too far. "*Can't!*" said Miranda firmly, avoiding Wilson's look. The man interposed quickly. "Hey, Joey, we all thunk 'twas M'randy done it. You better go on aout to th' barn, an' set the boys straight on who 'twas, an' see can you help with the man's work aout there?" The boy put his thumbs in the spot where his gun belt would some day be, and turned condescendingly to Miranda.

"*Can't*, if you want me to say it that way, Ranny, only," he explained, "you got to realize that men's talk ain't—isn't—always the same as good English." Before she could close her mouth, he had swaggered out the door, in as close an imitation of Stark's rider's stride as he could manage.

WILSON let out a guffaw that set the china in the cupboard rattling. "Thet'll teach you, M'randy," he gasped as soon as he could talk.

It was finally beginning to sink in. "You mean," she demanded, "you were just on your way here anyhow, and his sign made you come in shooting?"

"Don't mean nothin' of the kind," he said, "but thar ain't no harm in lettin' the boy think so."

"Then what?" *Leslie*, she thought, *Leslie did it.*

"Wa'al, like I wuz sayin', I met this feller comin' lickety-split inta town, yestiddy afternoon, es' as me an' the missus an' the kids was settin' out in the wagon to come back. He stop' us an' asked which way is th' doctor, an' we natcherly asked whar the trouble wuz. When he tell us it's out yer way, we got mighty consarned, and sommat suspicious too, on account nobody'd ever seen this hyar young feller before, an' I sorta got to wonderin' with all the noos o' bandits an' aoutlaws we heerd lately, w'ether thar wuz enny trouble aout here at yer place."

The man poked around in the fire for a minute, and Miranda knew better than to try and rush him. When Dick Wilson told a story, he told it in his own sweet time.

"Wa'al," he went on, finally, "I left Ginnie an' th' kids thar in the wagon, and took this hyar feller per-sonally over to Doc Steuer's, and I heerd him tell his story to th' Doc. Sez he was headin' east, an' ridin' fast, stopped at yore place fer water an' a bite t'eat, an' foun' Gilly sick, an' promis' yew he'd git the doctor fer yew. Thet all seemed on the up-n-up, excep' he did seem in one goshawful hurry to git outa taown agin. I didn' like thet somehaow, I jes' don't feel right easy with folks is in too much of a hurry."

Miranda leaned forward in her seat, "Yes?" she said impatiently,

"Please, Dick, what happened?"

"Wa'al, I'm afeered I mebbe got a mite rough with thet boy, but I got an eye fer these things, an' I could see he wuz wearin' hisself quite a belt onder his clo'es. An' I shore did locate some startlin' baggage in thet belt. Seem like he wuz carryin' half o' the Yenited States Mint, an' peculiar thing wuz, I got him over to the Sheriff's office, an' it seem the currency he wuz carryin' had come from aout a bank in Kansas jes' wuz robbed. He give us quite a story..."

He poked in the fire again.

"*Please,* Dick," Miranda pleaded. *He did get the doctor, he did, he did.*

"Moughty good-lookin' feller," Wilson commented, looking at her face. "Seems like yew know him, too. Ennyhaow, he give us quite a story. Said he met up with these hyar aoutlaws on the prairie...said he wuz sent aout from Carteret—that's whar the bank is thet wuz robbed—a'ter them, and met up with 'em, an' managed to git back some o' thet money. Sounded moughty strange, but we figgered the best thing to do wuz to leave him thar at the sheriff's whilst we rode aout thisaway, with the doctor an' a posse, jes' in case them aoutlaws had come a troublin' you, or in case they wuz still within ridin' range."

"I will say," he went on slowly, a little troubled, "thet young man could talk himself night into or aout of ennything atall. But I'm a mite opset right now. I shore wouldn' like to think he wuz tellin' ennything but the truth, but it do seem hard to onderstand, there's oney four o' them fellers when the dee-scription said there wuz five on 'em."

"There were," said Miranda firmly, "only four." She was about to go on, and then stopped in sudden surprise at herself. *He's an outlaw,* she thought, *there's no reason to let him get off.*

"Moughty good-lookin' young feller," Wilson said again, irrelevantly. "Fast talker, too, he is."

He got the doctor, Miranda thought. *He risked being caught when he got the doctor.*

"M'randy!" It was the doctor himself, drying his hands as he came into the room. "Whut's ailin' you, gal? Didn't you ever stop to look in thet boy's throat?"

"I certainly did, and th' way it looked made me more scared than the fever. I heard him cough too."

"Wa'al, yer brother has an ordinary case o' oversized tonsils," the doctor retorted tartly, "an' a'ter all this time a-takin' keer o' th' younkers by yoreself, I'd a-thought you'd a-known it when you seen it."

"It may be tonsils." She more than matched his tartness, "but it's no ordinary case,"

"I knowed it." He was grinning with delight. "I knowed I could take thet weary look off'n yore face, ef I jes' got yew mad ee-nough. M'randy," he said, turning to Wilson, "kin get madder'n enny other six wimmin alive."

"You needn' tell me abaout it." Dick matched the doctor's smile. "I kin recall Randa chasin' me with a poker once, a man o' my years, jes' cause I made a joke she thought th' youngsters oughtn'ta heerd. She wuz right, too," he added.

"My sister," said Joey, standing in the doorway, and exercising his new rights as man of the house, "don't ever get mad without cause."

"*Doesn't,* Joey." she said before she could stop herself.

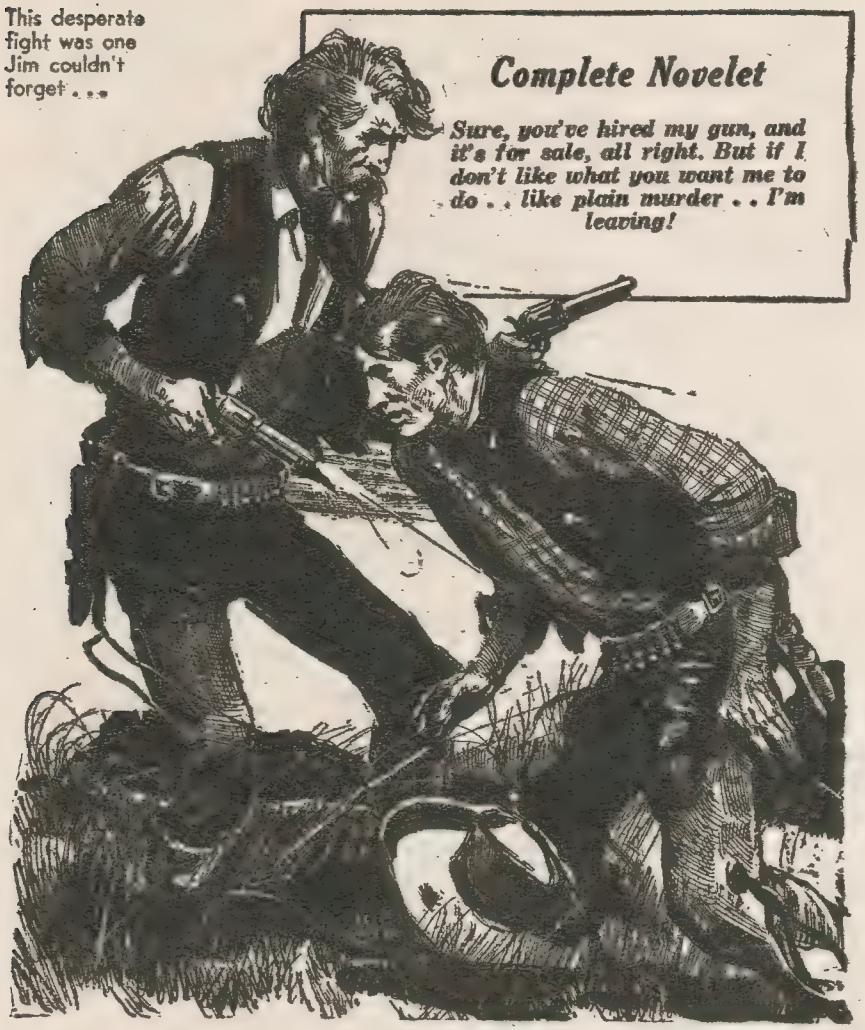
"Well," he said, "not very often, anyhow."

BY MIDDAY, the house and barn were cleared of all but the doctor, who was fast asleep after removing what he said were the biggest set of tonsils he'd ever seen, and Dick Wilson, who was waiting for his wife to come along in the wagon.

Ginnie Wilson marched in and took things over in her own way. She was a large woman, a good hundred and eighty pounds of bone, muscle, and energy. She got Gilly moved up to the loft, and all but lassoed Miranda to get her into the bed.

(Continued On Page 96)

This desperate fight was one Jim couldn't forget . . .



Complete Novelet

Sure, you've hired my gun, and it's for sale, all right. But if I don't like what you want me to do . . like plain murder . . I'm leaving!

Renegade's Mountain

By ALLAN K. ECHOLS

IN THE COOL of the evening he drew up to the small cabin to ask for water for his horse and himself. There is a peculiar light on the lee side of a mountain after the sun dips behind the crest, and this light softens the harsh contours of things, touches them with an overtone of peace and beauty. Perhaps it was the light that had the effect on him—or perhaps it was the musical voice coming in song as the girl walked up the path from the chicken house to the cabin. At any rate, he felt a sickness come upon him, a sickness he had often felt at the sight of a peaceful home in the quiet of the evening. Peace was a thing foreign to him.

And, as a man who had lived by his gun for these many years, he again impatiently thrust that sick feeling back into its secret compartment and tried to turn a key on it, while he slid from his horse at the approach of the girl.

"I was wondering, ma'am—"

"Why, Jim!" There was surprise in the girl's musical voice as she recognized him.

He looked at her, puzzled for a moment at the vaguely familiar face. The vivid recollection of a long-forgotten fight came to him...two grizzled cowhands who had caught him on their grass...sixguns drawn swiftly...his own gun shot from his hand after he'd triggered once and got one of them. He remembered plunging into the other cowhand, a leather-tough veteran, remembered hating what he was doing. And behind him a girl's voice, calling out to the oldster as she rode up, a lariat in her hand... He stopped thinking of the events that followed, recalling only the girl's face and the loathing in it.

But this couldn't be the same girl ...no, there was only a resemblance, he saw now. Then she laughed. "You don't remember me. I'm Naomi Hilton."

Then he knew. But five years had made a difference in the wild-riding little spitfire daughter of Bob Hilton, one of the big ranchers down in Concho County. Her freckles were gone; she had developed into a slim and graceful girl, and her untamed nature seemed to have fled before a quiet gentleness. The surprise in him at seeing her, and at seeing her beauty, held him breathless and silent for a moment.

"Don't you recognize me?" she asked.

"Of course, Naomi," he said slowly. "But you've changed a great deal. And I wasn't expecting to see you here."

They talked briefly, and gradually the conversation lost its ease; he felt uncomfortable. Her father had been a big rancher, his father a nester, when the fence war had broken out in those days past.

"I was just hoping to water my horse," he said finally. "And ask about a ranch called the Double F."

In the dusk, he saw a shadow cross her face; she looked at him queerly. "You were looking for Fulton?"

"Yes. Do you happen to know him?"

"His place is right over there on the other side of the mountain," she answered remotely. "You'll find the trail about a mile up the road. And the water's right out there at the trough. If you'll excuse me now—"

She turned and hurried into the cabin.

He felt the change in her and it made him feel uncomfortable. Then he moved out to the water trough, watered his horse and drank, and set out on the trail to the Double F, with a great bone-weariness eating at him.

He was still on the near side of thirty, but it occurred to him now that he had lived too much in the ten years since he had left home, too much and too hard. It took a heavy toll out of a man to live by the gun, and it gave him no peace, nor offered him any.

HE PASSED over the mountain and came just after dark to a ranchhouse on the west slope. The place looked fairly substantial, with a couple of big hay barns and a stock barn, and other stock sheds and haying tools about. These things he saw by moonlight as he pulled his horse up to a stop and shouted before the house.

A man came to the door—wearing pistols in the house, he noticed—and shouted, "Who is it?"

"Are you Fulton?" he countered.

"Yes. What do you want?"

He slid off his horse easily and stepped up to the porch. "I came to see what you wanted; you can call me Marlow."

There was a note of relief from suspicion in the rancher's voice as he said, "Oh, come in, Marlow," and led him into a room of the cabin. The place had the usual slovenliness of quarters where there were no women, and the lamp on the table had a smoky chimney.

One man sat on the edge of a bunk, another in a chair leaned back against the wall beside a pine table. Still another stood with his back to the wall, one foot up against the wall behind him.

Inside the house, Fulton faced his visitor and asked sharply, "Who sent you?"

"Fletcher."

"He give you a letter or anything?"

The newcomer took off his hat and extracted a letter from inside the band, and handed it to Fulton, who took it over to the lamp and read it slowly, then thrust it into his pocket.

Then Fulton said to the room in general, "Men, this is Marlow, that I was telling you about. He's from down on the Verdigris."

Jim let his eyes read sign on all four of the occupants, then asked Fulton. "Who are these men?" It was impersonal, like asking about the owner of some cows.

"That's Siringo on the bunk,

Blacky Thaw waitin' for the chair to slide out from under him, and Brazos Slim standin' there like a crane in a mudhole. I'm expecting another man, but we don't have to wait for him. In the meantime, about you: did Fletcher tell you what I wanted you for when he handed you my letter?"

"I just understood you had some high-pay work you wanted done. And I don't work cheap; what are you paying?"

"A hundred, board and bullets. Y'understand, you'll be earning it."

"Let's get it straight. I don't touch Uncle Whiskers' mail or his express, and I don't touch any National banks or other kind of banks. When I go in for that, it won't be for wages. It'll be on my own. And—one other thing—if I don't happen to like any of the jobs you throw my way, I don't take 'em, and don't take your wages. If that suits you, then you've hired a hand."

Fulton rubbed his stubbled chin. It was evident that it didn't set well with him to have a man hiring to him state the terms of the deal, but he held back from commenting while he thought this over. "I've heard you was mighty independent, Marlow, but I reckon we'll get along. I don't guess you'll run into anything here that you ain't messed in plenty before."

Brazos Slim had just rolled a cigaret; now he blew out a smoke ring, and said in a voice that was filled with contempt, "Sounds too independent for me. Gets to rainin' a little lead, and he might find the job don't suit him. I'd say—"

Jim took one step, jerked Brazos away from the wall by his collar, then drove his fist into the man's chin with force enough to knock him staggering clear across the room, where he fell on the bunk and rolled to the floor. He followed the man across the floor and waited for him to get up. Brazos saw him standing there, and kept still.

Fulton roared, "Damn it to hell, Brazos. You'll never learn to keep that big mouth of yours shut. Get up off'n that floor."

Then he turned to Jim, and he put all the authority he could muster into his voice. "Maybe he had it coming, but save that fight you've got in you for other purposes. You'll get a chance to use it, and I won't have trouble in my own crew. Don't forget that; I'm running this crew, and I say no fighting."

"So I've still got a job?"

"Yes, you've still got a job."

"Then what is it?"

"I'm waiting for another man that's supposed to drift in tonight. He gets here, I'll explain the whole deal once for all."

Chapter Two

JIM HAD settled back to sitting on the pine table; while he rolled a cigarette he watched Brazos get up, rub his chin, and sit down on the bunk. He caught Brazos' black eyes glancing venomously at him, but gave him no further attention. He gave his attention to the others in the room, sizing them up as a man would judge livestock. Scrubs, every one of them. Range scum! A fine mess of human vultures for a man to spend a lifetime with, when there was such peace and music in the world as he had just heard across the mountain!

Fulton was a hungry skunk, a schemer who would hire such as the others—including himself—to do his dirty work for him, and then throw them out or destroy them when they were no longer of value to him. As to the rest, they were of a stripe—they were the kind that would do Fulton's work as long as Fulton paid blood-money wages.

They all heard the other horse stop outside, and the shout of the new rider. "That'll be Edge," Fulton said, and went to the door.

The man who came in with Fulton was a tall man past middle age, lean of frame and with thick crows-feet around the corners of his eyes. He was unarmed, and seemed to be in a hurry.

Fulton said, "Sit down, Edge, and meet the boys."

Edge had a sharpness in his voice. "That won't be necessary," he said. "I just came to tell you that I'm not in with you on this business, and I don't want you sending for me any more; I don't need work that bad."

"Now, now," Fulton said in a conciliatory voice. "You don't want to let us down like that, Edge. You need me just the same as I need you."

"I don't need you a little bit," Edge snapped, "And it don't make any difference to me whether you need me or not; I'm not with you. And I don't want you or anybody else around here to get the impression that I am. You sent Moran Shaw with your message just to give the folks the idea that you and me was friends; well, we're not, and won't be. That's my story."

"But," Fulton answered softly. "That ain't the whole story. The railroad's going to have to come through this way to get through Limestone Gap, and that means a land boom—including your land. Whoever owns this land is gonna sell it to the railroad for a mighty fat piece of money. And the more we've got to sell 'em, the more we make."

"That may be so, but those little fellows with their quarter sections deserve the profit on their land, same as anybody else. I'm not thinking of helping you run 'em off or scare 'em into selling to you. I'm not thinking of helping you make widows out of their womenfolks, and then buying the land from the widows for a song. I misjudged you, Fulton, till you looked out from under your sheepskin; now, you and me is through."

"No, no," Fulton purred. "You just think we're through. Me and you is just beginning. You see, I happened to know who you are, and where you came from. You come up here into the Territory from Texas just a couple of jumps ahead of a sheriff with a murder warrant, about ten years ago. Now that you've settled down and married and made some money, you've got the itch to keep on living respectable. No soap, Edge; I need you and you're going to play along with me or—well, there ain't no statute of limitations on murder."

Edge looked very old and weary at that moment, and Jim, squatting in the corner, felt a strong sympathy for him. A man who has kept a secret for ten years gets quite a shock when he learns that it is no longer a secret, and that it can blow up the whole edifice he has built over it.

Edge said wearily, "There's no use in explaining to you, but there was no justification for that murder warrant in the first place. I caught a deputy sheriff's brother stealing my stock, and I shot him, like anybody else would do. If it hadn't been the deputy's brother, nothing would have come of it."

"That," Fulton purred, "is not for me to decide; it's a matter for the court—in case you'd rather go back and face a trial."

"Neither you nor a court of law is going to decide how I live my life," Edge snapped. "I'm just telling you. Lay off me; walk around me from now on. If I've got to pay for a killing, then I'll get my money's worth out of your hide."

Edge turned his back and started to walk out of the house when Fulton said, "Hold it, Edge." Then he addressed the room in general. "Boys, here's a gent that's hard to curry. There ain't no use in trying to persuade him nothing, so he won't be no use to us. But he knows our business, and he's the kind that would like to break it up just for meanness. I don't think he ought to be running around loose."

"You can shoot me in the back and be damned to you," Edge said. "I'm through running from anybody."

Fulton said, "Siringo, he's threatened me—here in the presence of everybody. Kill him."

Jim said, "No, Siringo! Don't touch your gun; because the minute you do, you're going to have a dead boss—and then who'd pay you for killing Edge?"

FULTON swung his head around to look at his new rider—and he looked into the muzzle of a gun. The gun was dancing nervously, the muzzle wavering between Fulton and Siringo. "I believe I can get you both. Want to see?"

"What the hell is this, Marlow?" Fulton roared. "Are you working for me or Edge?"

"I'm working for you, but like I said, I pick my jobs. And this is one I don't like to be in on. There's no sense in making a man do something he don't want to do. Edge don't want to help chase nesters off their land, so he don't have to if he don't want to. I kind of like his guts, and I don't like to see a man get the dirty end of a stick for standing up for his own right to do what suits him. Edge, you can go without getting a bullet in your back."

Edge looked at the young man with a long, curious look, then said, "Thanks, mister. But I can't figger what you're doing hanging out with a flock of buzzards like this."

"That would be my personal business," was the answer; "you'd better get along."

Edge looked around the room speculatively. Fulton kept his eyes off everybody, but said to Edge, "All right, go on. But you made a mistake in not playing along with me. A bad mistake, mister."

Edge turned and got out of the place, and in a moment the sound of his running horse died in the distance. Fulton kept his eyes on the floor in thought for a long while, then lifted them and studied his new man.

"Marlow," he said, "I don't understand you. Fletcher said that you were a peculiar fellow, independent as hell, and with a lot of queer ideas. Particularly for a man with a gun for sale."

"Maybe I am queer, but I still play my ideas," came the answer. "The deal was that I had a say-so about anything I was in on. And plain, cold-blooded murder, without some kind of excuse to back it up, is poor policy for anybody. Anybody at all. It has a way of backfiring on a man; that's why I am not sitting in on it."

Fulton studied him a long moment. "You know," he said thoughtfully, "maybe you've got more sense than I gave you credit for. There might be something to what you say, at that. After all, if you're the deadly boy that's got away with thirty-three killings and never seen the inside of a jail that Fletcher says you are, then you ought to know what you're doing."

"No hard feelings, then?"

"No. Not this time. But don't forget this: I'm the man that hired your gun, and I'm the man that gives the orders when the time comes."

"You've mentioned that before. Now how about telling me what my job is?"

"You got the most of it from Edge's spouting off. There's land here that I want title to; there's nobody to stop me from getting it, except a few little boys who own it, and haven't got the strength to keep me from getting it. This Territory is new, Marlow, and there's no law to speak of this side of Fort Smith. It's still a raw country where a man that's good enough can go out and get what he wants. There's land here that I want, and I'm good enough to go out and get it. It might take a little rough stuff, and that's what I'm paying you boys for. Now you've got it on the barrel-head; how does it suit you?"

"I'll play along for a while, anyway. If there's anything I don't like, you'll hear about it from me and I'll take out."

"That's a deal," Fulton said. "And if there's anything about the way you handle things, you'll hear about it from me, and you'll take out, then, too."

"When do we start?"

"We were going to start as soon as you got here, but this Edge feller has kind of put a spoke in the wheel. We'll hold off another day or so, and in the meantime, you can kind of rest up from your trip."

FULTON did not explain himself further. They all had a few drinks, then turned in, Fulton staying in the house and the four riders going out to the bunkhouse at the rear. The slender man named Brazos was sullen and kept his eyes off the rest of them; the others let him alone, knowing he was chafing under the whipping he had got. Blackie Thaw hadn't yet spoken a word.

Siringo acted cheerful, with an enforced cheerfulness, and Jim was not fooled by him. None of these men were the type to forget an affront, and both of them had had their pride ruffled this night by the man who was going to sleep in the bunkhouse with them.

Jim found a bunk and undressed, hanging his clothes and gunbelt and holster on the stanchion supporting his bunk. When the last man was in bed, and the light was blown out, he reached up and got his pistol out of its holster and put it under his pillow.

He lay awake long, bringing back to his mind the music of that voice he had heard over on the other side of the mountain. He called himself a fool, reminded himself that a man who lived by the gun was not the man who could afford to indulge in dreams of a home and of peace, and of a musical voice in the dusk.

But, then, he reminded himself, that was a false peace he had seen over there across the mountain. There was a cloud on its horizon, though the girl had not seen it. He gave this some thought, then dropped off to sleep, not settling anything in his own mind.

Chapter Three

THE NEXT morning Fulton sent Jim and Brazos out to a back range. "There's some new calves being born out there, and the wolves are pretty bad. Pick up that stock and drive it in closer to the creek down here where the wolves ain't so bad. Siringo, I got a different job for you. You wait here. Blackie, I've got some fencing for you to do."

Siringo always wore a kind of unhumorous smile around the corners of his eyes, giving him a cynical look, which he now turned on Jim, as though he were secretly laughing at him. "See you boys later," he said, as Jim and Brazos rode off, Brazos still sullen.

They came later to broken country where the trail became so narrow that two horses could not move abreast. Brazos pulled his horse back to let Jim ride in front.

Jim pulled his horse back, holding him alongside the other animal. "After you, Brazos," he said softly. "You know the way."

There was a taunting laughter in his voice, and Brazos recognized its quality, his black face turning purple with rage. He could not make a point of riding behind, so he shrugged and went on. Jim followed him through the broken ground to the rich pasture land behind it.

There were patches of trees here, and a ribbon of woods following a small winding creek. "We might as well start in the woods on the creek bottom and get the stuff out into the open," Brazos said. "You take one side of the creek and I'll take the other."

Jim smiled at him. "Here's a better idea," he said quietly. "I'll take both sides of the creek and you round up that stuff in the open and meet me with them down there at the pond. I wouldn't like to think of you being in the woods with a rifle in your saddle boot," Jim answered easily. "So, we'll do it my way."

"I been here longer than you," Brazos snapped, "and we'll do it my way."

"You're wrong," Jim said. "And if you want to make a point of it, we'll settle it now."

Brazos tried to stare him down, but he didn't have the stuff to do it with. After a moment, he shrugged. "Suit yourself, mister; but you're sure tryin' to ride high in your stirrups for a new man."

"I'll ride high enough to see

what's going on around me," Jim answered. "Ride on and let's get this job over."

It took them two hours to get the cattle bunched and strung out toward the ranch, and when they got moving, Jim rode over to Brazos and stopped his horse.

"Now, friend," he said, "I'm a little tired of having to watch behind my back every minute. So, there's only one answer; you get out of the country—now."

Brazos dropped his brows into a scowl. "What the hell are you talking about, feller?"

"I'm telling you to ride. Get clear out of the country and don't come back."

"Who the hell do you think you are?" Brazos snapped. "I'm working for Fulton, and I ain't taking orders from nobody else."

"You *were* working for Fulton. Now you're drifting over the hill for keeps! And if I see that face of yours again I'll put a bullet through it. Or do you want to see if I can do it now?"

Brazos opened his mouth to speak, blinked and held it open—staring into the muzzle of the Colt which had somehow flown into Jim's hand.

"Yeah," Jim said smoothy. "That's the way it is. You or me; how do you want it?"

He sat his saddle and watched Brazos droop in the shoulders, then turn his horse and strike a canter in the general direction of the Kiamish hills, the hideout for the wild bunch for the whole of the Territory. And as he watched, a great weariness came upon him. The man was pure skunk, but he was no different from the rest of his kind. In the last few hours Jim had begun to feel a great weight within him, which he knew came from having spent too much time too close to this kind of person.

There were other kinds of people in this world; there were people who were clean, who lived in happiness and in peace, and who had music in their hearts. People like Naomi Hilton who lived over on the other side of the mountain with her father.

They had been neighbors once, down in Texas, but there had been a gulf between them even then. Her father had been a big rancher, his father a nester. The ranchers had not wanted to see their open grazing ground plowed up into wheat and corn fields, and there had been war; his father had died of a bullet, and he left alone, had gone riding out to make his living, carrying with him the only two things he had—a bitterness in his heart and his father's old gun!

There was no pleasure in the memory of those years; there had been no beauty in the sunsets, no song in his throat.

IT WAS LATE afternoon when he brought the herd up close to the ranch and threw them onto the creek bottom and rode on up to the house. When he got there, he found two strange horsemen talking to Fulton and Siringo out near the corrals. Blackie Thaw was standing around. One of the strangers wore a badge.

The marshal looked at Jim, studied him up and down, then turned back to Fulton, continuing his talk. "For my part, I don't believe a word of what you say. Edge had already come to me and told me his story, from way back until he had his talk with you last night. I think, Fulton, that you took Siringo to Edge's place today to pick a fight with him and kill him, hoping to get the job done before he had talked to anybody."

"What you believe, Marshal, and what actually happened, are two different things. Edge was over here last night, all right, but he came to bawl me out because some of my stock got onto his oat patch and ate some of his oats."

"His oat patch is fenced," the marshal argued.

"Yeah, but what kind of fence? Three wires, and half of them down at every other post. It wouldn't hold nothing out, and he was too lazy to fix it. You can't just go tell a cow not to cross a fenceline and expect him to do it. But even so, I and Siringo went over to drive out any of our stuff that might be in his oats.

And we was doing that when Edge came a riding out a cussin' and a snortin'. Edge called Siringo a name; Siringo told him to take it back, and Edge drawed on Siringo. You can't hold it against Siringo for defending hisself. And I'm the witness that says he was defending hisself."

The marshal had a disgusted look on his face, realizing that he could not make his case hold water. "Well, I have to take the word of the only witness there was to the shooting. That's the law. But let me tell you, Fulton—personally I still don't believe a word of it. You'd better watch your step."

Emboldened, Fulton answered, "You'd better watch your step, accusing innocent people of murder, against all the evidence."

Disgustedly, the marshal turned his horse and spurred him out of the back yard, followed by his deputy. Fulton watched him go, then looked at Siringo; the two men exchanged cynical smiles.

Jim pulled his horse up to the trough and watered him, anger at the murder of Edge making his temples throb. So Fulton had sent him out to gather up stock to get him out of the way while they took care of Edge!

Chapter Four

FULTON came up to Jim, and said, "Where's Brazos?"

"He rode on."

"Rode on where to?"

"I haven't the slightest idea; he just set out toward the hills."

Fulton's eyes narrowed as he studied his strange rider. "You and him had a set-t- last night. You wouldn't have had anything to do with his pulling out, would you?"

"I kinda thought it was a good idea, his going."

"So you chased him!" Fulton snapped. "Marlow, just what have you got up your sleeve? You covered Edge against me last night, and now you drive Brazos away. I'm beginning to wonder just who you are and what you're up to, anyway?"

"You got Fetcher's letter of introduction, didn't you? I told you why I covered Edge, and you agreed I was right. As for Brazos, if I stick around here I'm going to need sleep; I can't spend all my time watching a man that was looking for the first chance he could get to put a bullet in my back. Brazos tried that trick on me twice today, so I sent him on his way. You can find somebody else to take his place."

"Yes, but I want to get it started now, and now I've only got you and Siringo and Blackie."

"Last night you was figuring on waiting a while."

"But that was last night. Now that Edge and Siringo had that little trouble—"

"You've got Edge out of your way, so you can go on with your plans. Right?"

Fulton shook his head in puzzlement. "Fletcher wrote me you was a queer customer, but be damned if I can understand you yet; I don't know whether I like it or not."

"You'll get used to me," Jim answered, and remounted his animal which was through drinking.

"Where are you going now?"

"We'll, I'll tell you," Jim answered. "Since you're about ready to get busy, I reckon I kind of ought to scout around and get familiar with the territory I'm likely to be riding over. Can't ever tell, I might be in a hurry some time or other, and it would come in handy for me to know my way around. I'll be back in a little while."

He rode away, not looking back.

Fulton leaned against the corral, with Siringo beside him, and watched him ride away. There was a puzzled look on Fulton's face, which he did not bother to hide from Siringo, who wore his habitual cynical smile. Siringo was amused at Fulton's puzzlement.

"Independent cuss," Siringo observed.

"Yeah," Fulton answered thoughtfully, "and I don't like it any too well. He's got me puzzled. If it wasn't for what Fletcher said about him, I'd have got rid of him last night."

"He must be somewhat of a stem-

winder, the way he acts."

"Well, this is what it's like. I wrote Fletcher to get me a good salty man who could handle a gun and didn't mind using it. He said he'd try to get Jim Marlow. This Marlow has been in probably more gunbattles than any man down in Texas, and never got a scratch, according to Fletcher. He'd go up against half a dozen men any day before breakfast, and when it was all over he'd manage someway to have a whole hide and a clean alibi. Independent as hell, though; if he sold his gun to you, he might do queer things, but he was your man as long as it pleased him to work for you. And he hates the law worse'n poison—killed half a dozen lawmen, or more."

"I've heard about him from time to time," Siringo admitted. "I guess he's the real article, but he's all of as queer as your friend Fletcher says, all right."

"He may be," Fulton admitted, "but a man can have too much a mind of his own when he's working for me. He might get notions that wouldn't fit in with mine. Tell you what you do. You get on your horse and trail him, wherever he goes; I don't like not knowing what my men are up to."

SIRINGO saddled up his horse, then said to Fulton, "There's one little item. I believe you was going to hand me a hundred, wasn't you?"

"Why, I'll take care of that pretty soon."

"Now's as good a time as any. Remember, the deal was a hundred dollar bounty on each scalp I brought you under orders, payable immediately. Well, I brought in Edge's scalp, and I'd kinda like the sound of that money jingling in my pockets; makes a pretty music that I like to hear."

"What's the matter?" Fulton asked, swelling up with offended dignity. "Don't you trust me?"

"Yeah, but I ain't much a hand at bookkeeping. You can make it five double eagles, so they'll tinkle nice, then I'll go trail Marlow."

Fulton paid off, grumbling, "I never seen such suspicious people in my born days; you'd think I was going to cheat you or something."

"It ain't that," Siringo grinned. "I know you wouldn't cheat a man out of his honest earnings."

"All right, you've got your money. And when you find out what that Marlow is up to, you might ride on over to Hilton's and see if we are there. Me and Blackie is going to drop in on him and kind of talk turkey to him."

"He's another hard nut to crack, ain' he?" Siringo grinned.

"He thinks he is. Used to be a big man down in Texas, and he can't get the idea that now he's just another little nester, and crippled at that. I'm tired of fooling with him, and I'm telling him so tonight. There might be a nice little bonfire over across the mountain after dark. A big red glow in the sky might make some of the others around here think twice before turning down good money for their places."

JIM RODE down toward the Edge ranch. After he had gone a half mile, he turned and looked behind him and saw a man on a horse setting out in his direction. He rode on down to the woods at the creek he would have to cross, and waited there until he recognized Siringo, saw that the man was following him. Then he mounted and rode on to the Edge place.

There were neighbors at the Edge's for the funeral, and these people looked at this armed intruder with suspicious and angry glances. News spreads fast across even thinly inhabited prairie, and his association with Fulton must already be common knowledge. The people kept out of his way, as though he were some loathsome animal.

He found Edge's mourning wife, and got her aside. "Ma'am," he said, "you don't know me, and it doesn't matter—"

"I know enough about you," the woman said spiritedly. "You're one of Fulton's men, and that's enough for me. You all have murdered my husband. Why can't you let me alone, now that he's dead?"

"I understand how you feel," he

answered. "I just wanted to give you a warning. Fulton is going to try to buy your land from you sooner or later. He won't offer you much. But don't sell it to him; there is a railroad coming through here, and your land will be worth a great deal more pretty soon than it is now. Just don't let Fulton force you to sell it to him—or to anybody else. I wish I could do more, ma'am, but that's all I can do."

He nodded to her, and walked out of the house, through the hostile stares of the neighbors. When he got out into the yard he found Siringo just riding up. He mounted and moved his horse over to Siringo. "Not here, fellow," he said. "We'll ride on a piece to do our talking."

Siringo's crow's feet crinkled at the corners of his eyes, and he said, "So?"

"So! Turn your horse around."

"Maybe you'd like to turn him around for me."

"I would like it," Jim answered. "But there's a funeral here, so we'll ride."

Siringo saw Jim's gun suddenly fly into his hand and bear steadily on his middle. "Not bad," Siringo grinned, "for a beginner."

Nonetheless he shrugged, gathered up his reins and spurred his animal along down the road with Jim. They reached the crossroads, and there by unspoken common consent, they both reined up, and their horses were practically facing each other.

"Now," Jim said, "It was nice knowing you. You just keep on that road and maybe you'll catch up with Brazos. He went that way."

"That was Brazos—not me. Personally, I think I'll stick around and see how this thing ends up. I kind of have a hankering to know who you really are, and what you're doing here."

"You heard Fletcher's letter to Fulton, didn't you? Ain't that enough for you?"

"It would have been—except for the fact that I happened to have been on a job with Marlow once. And you ain't Marlow, or anything like Marlow. So, I'll stick around and see the blowoff."

"I'll tell you something, Siringo. Curiosity about other people's business is a bad thing, and you won't be here to get yours satisfied. Get on down the road; I'll tell Fulton you're gone."

"Maybe I'll tell him *you're* gone."

"Maybe, in that case, you'd better not waste any time in making your play. See if you're as lucky as you were with Edge."

"Not lucky, good—"

Siringo's gun came into his hand in a blur of speed—and it spat fire. But, fast as he was, he was not fast enough; a bullet drilled him in the forehead and slapped him clear off his horse just as his gun went off, its bullet going wild. Siringo was dead when he hit the ground.

His horse dashed off frantically, heading back toward the Fulton place. Jim looked down at the fallen gunman, the man's cynical smile gone from his face, leaving it cruel and hard in death.

Then Jim turned his horse and rode over the mountain—heading again toward the musical voice which he still heard every time he brought the girl's picture back to his mind.

Chapter Five

IT WAS IN the cool of the evening now, twenty four hours since he had ridden up to this small cabin to ask for water for his horse and himself. The same peculiar light on the lee side of the mountain softened the harsh contours of things and gave them the same overtone of peace and beauty.

And sitting under the tree in front of the cabin, he saw the shrunken and drooping figure of the man he recognized as Bob Hilton, who had once been a big cattleman, robust and proud. Now this frail man sitting in the old chair under the tree squinted at him a long moment, then reached over and picked up a rifle leaning against the tree, and held it in his lap with his finger on the trigger.

"That's close enough, young man," he said, when Jim had approached to within a dozen paces of him.

Jim halted his horse and slid out

of the saddle. "Howdy, Mr. Hilton," he said. "I wanted to have a little talk with you."

"We ain't got nothing to talk about, Jim Redfern," the old man said. "I've told Fulton and I'm telling you, that I ain't selling this place, even if Fulton offered what it was worth. And I ain't afraid of Fulton or all the gunhands he can pour on me. Now ride on about your business."

"I'm not one of Fulton's gunhands, Mr. Hilton."

"Don't lie, young man; you came by here while I was gone to the doctor yesterday, and asked Naomi how to get to Fulton's place. Besides, others saw you riding into his place. Edge saw you there."

"Well, still I'm not one of Fulton's gunhands."

"You call yourself Marlow, and you've built up a reputation as a real killer down in Texas. I never thought that Jud Redfern's son would turn out Mad-dog mean, but I was mistaken. You don't deny that you call yourself Marlow?"

"No! But—"

"Well, I've been reading about your killings in the Texas Stockman for years. And so you are Jim Redfern, and you changed your name to Marlow—"

"You'd better listen, Mr. Hilton. I did not change my name to Marlow until three days ago—the day I killed the real Marlow in a gun battle. Up to that time, I always called myself Jim Redfern. So, I couldn't have done all those killings you read about."

The girl had come silently out the front door, and had sat down on a long bench beside her father's chair. She looked at Jim Redfern, but there was a distant coldness in her look which gave him a sense of being lost in some vast desert with never any way out of it, with nothing to do but to drift lost and alone for eternity. And without the sound of her music.

Old Hilton said, "You don't deny that you're working for Fulton under the name of Marlow?"

"Yes. But this is the way that happened—"

"I don't care how it happened." The old man was grazing down the road into the twilight. "There comes your boss, now, with another one of his varmints. Well, I ain't afraid of all three of you. You might finish me off, but you'll know you been in a fight, even if I am crippled."

Jim Redfern, for that was his real name, turned and looked down the road in the direction that Bob Hilton was gazing, and he made out Fulton and Blackie Thaw riding in, side by side. He turned back to Hilton and Naomi.

"Get into your house quick, and bar the door. I'll take care of them."

"I'll do my own fighting right here," the old man answered. "Naomi, you get inside. I've got this varmint covered—"

Redfern dived at old Hilton before the old man finished talking, and grabbed his rifle.

"Quick, Naomi," he said, and the name slipped out without his realizing it. "Help me get him inside before that pair gets here; he's in no shape to fight."

SOMETHING commanding in his voice, or else it was a dee-seated feat for her father's safety, caused the girl to come and take her father's arm opposite that now held by Redfern. Together they took the protesting old man into the house, and Redfern handed the girl the rifle. "Now keep your door barred," he said.

Fulton and Blackie Thaw rode up into the yard, and in the dusk, Fulton looked at Jim Redfern suspiciously.

"What are you doing here?" he demanded. "And where's Siringo? I sent him—"

"To tail me," Jim Redfern finished for him. "And it was bad business—for him and for you. I tried to get him to follow Brazos, but he didn't like the idea, so he's lying on his back in the ditch over there at the crossroads."

Fulton said, "Marlow, you've broke up my whole crew, and now I find you here. What is this?"

"Like I told you, Fulton, I make my own decisions about the jobs I

(Continued On Page 98)

Dowry Paid in Lead

Gripping Rangeland Novel

by CLIFF CAMPBELL

When Bill Boone and Neva Winters found each other, it seemed as if a generations-long feud had finally ended. Then the elder Boone and Winters were found where they'd shot it out, and the peal of weddings bells changed to the whine of bullets and the moans of dying men . . .

THE WINTERS-BOONE feud had lasted into the third generation. That is, the third generation on Madrone Range. It seemed that no one, not even the Winters' or the Boones' themselves, knew how far beyond that homesteading, gun-fighting period the common hatred extended. Some said there were two Boones and a Winters who had a scrap with blunderbusses the afternoon of the day the Mayflower landed. The fact that those adventurers sailed under aliases made it plain that their capacity for trouble was nothing new.

Today, beyond the Rockies, the two clans were burying their oldest members, Sam Boone and John Winters, going under an unspoken truce, while the lesser population, citizens of Madrone, looked on at a distance. A motley, though respectful crowd—except for Ed Riggs, the land agent, and his usual gang of imported gunmen. All through the services, Riggs kept up a running fire of undertone remarks about both factions to his retainers.

Riggs made special, biting comments over the fact that Sam Boone and John Winters had succeeded in smoking each other down. He chortled until his flesh shook, finding

the business a matter of rare humor.

Neva Winters' usually soft, hazel eyes were dry and tigerish as she walked away from the graveyard and stared up into Bill Boone's immobile face. The touch of pity on young Boone's hard-set lips was wasted as her voice cut at him like a rawhide quirt. "Well, Bill, the feud goes on."

Boone nodded. "Yes, Neva, it looks that way. But things aren't always what they seem."

"You broke your promise," she accussed; "you said there would be no more bloodshed."

"No, Neva; I didn't break my promise. I said no Boone would ever kill another Winters."

"But a Boone did kill a Winters! I hate people who haven't the courage to face the truth!" Her voice was near the breaking point. Then she pulled herself together and said quietly. "I won't make a scene here, Bill. For the last time, meet me at—" She looked into his eyes, her throttled emotions allowing no expression to cross the forced stolidness of her face.

"All right, Neva," Bill spoke his understanding. "I'll be there."

He lowered his gaze and watched her pull her buckskin glove slowly over his ring. Head high, the queenly-looking girl spun about and took the reins of her horse from the hands of one of her waiting cowboys.

As she wheeled and galloped away, eleven Winters' cowhands, heavily armed, slushed through the mud to their horses and pounded after her. It was noticeable that none of them tried to come near her, each being quick to read her desire for solitude.

And, thought Bill Boone, that loneliness would be severe; Neva was next to assume command of the Winters clan, now that her father was gone—a responsibility that isolated her from the others. Boone felt that same thing only too keenly himself, for now that his father was dead he, too, must bear the weight of responsibility, the gnawing loneliness that depressed the spirit and wearied the body.

WITH WEARINESS creeping into his face as he watched the Winters outfit grow small with distance, horses pounding full gallop, mud flying like a hail of bullets, Boone turned absently toward his own mount, but jerked up at the first step. One of Neva Winters' men was waiting beside the hitchrack for him—clean-cut Tex Kreen, Neva's foreman.

"Boone," Tex drawled, "I'm sure sorry's hell this had to happen. Things were lookin' promisin'—what with you and Neva plannin' to end this feud business by marryin' each other."

"Thanks, Tex," Boone said. "Guess that was just a dream after all. We'd planned mighty hard, though."

"Just wanted you to understand," Texas drawled on. "Bein' on opposite sides of somethin' that's bound to get bad, is sure tough. I'll be stickin' to th' Winters though; always treated me white—mighty white."

"I understand, Tex. Wouldn't think much of you if you looked at it in any other way."

Kreen crawled slowly onto his horse. "I still feel th' same toward you personally. Hope we don't meet th' next time where—well, in th' dark, for instance, where I can't see who I'm shootin' at."

"It's hell, Tex!"

The thud of hoofs drew everyone's attention in the direction of an oncoming horseman, one of the Winters' crew turned back. The man, a hot-blooded young Winters clansman, brought up in a rearing, skidding halt, twisting his body to keep his gaze on the group as the horse went all the way around in a mud-stamping circle.

"You need any help here, Tex!" he snapped. "Didn't notice till just now you hadn't come on. Guess I was thinkin' of—well, maybe of grandpop lyin' out there under that damn' mound of clay!"

"No, Tommy," Tex answered softly. "Just ride along; I'm comin' pronto."

Tommy glared at Boone, at

Boone's clan and cowhands behind him, then wheeled and struck his horse with both spurs. The excited animal lunged. His feet slipped from under him; he stumbled, but caught and thundered headlong over the muddy trail.

"You see how it is, Boone," Tex nodded his head at the hot-blood, then slowly shook it from side to side. "Well, be seein' you."

"Yes," Boone nodded. "Be seein' you."

Ominous words. Truly, they would be seeing each other—all too soon; the temper of the clans was at white-hot heat.

Kreen, lips hard set, pulled his horse away from the hitchrack and cantered slowly after the others.

A FINE MAN, Boone thought, watching the easy set of Tex's whipcord body in the saddle; only years upon years of horsemanship bred that. A fine man—a splendid picture—blue-eyed, strong-chinned; blond, almost cotton-haired; ruddy cheeks.

Once, Boone had been almost jealous of him, of his closeness to Neva Winters, but had trampled down the feeling. If Neva came to love Tex Kreen, success to Tex—Bill Boone had no right to say otherwise, no matter how he felt about the matter. Later, when Neva admitted her love for Bill, he discovered that Tex had never so much as broached the subject to the girl.

Neva had laughed, "Why, Bill, don't you know that good old Tex could never love anything except a horse or a cow!"

Which was about the truth. Tex was a cowhand through and through.

"What's n e x t, boss?" Boone's stocky foreman, Lig Starr, stepped up. He indicated the Boone clansmen and the stern-faced Boone punchers half-circling them.

"Go home!" Bill Boone ordered, "And stay there!"

"But don't you think you'd better have a few men along with you, just in case some gunny—"

"I can take care of myself, Lig!" Boone cut him short. "I'm meeting Neva. Be along later. Don't let the boys go on with that fence job. I've already sent for a state surveyor. We're holding up everything until he says where the line goes."

Lig fumbled with the girth of his saddle, hesitated. "You sure you don't need an extra gun or two along?"

"Why?"

Starr mounted, looked down from atop his horse. "Dunno. Maybe Neva Winters means all right, but you don't know who'll be waitin' along th' trail."

"Get going, Lig! All of you!" Boone's voice pitched a bit high from its usual throaty beating. "If you hang around here any longer, you'll start trouble!"

With a clatter and skidding of hoofs on the slippery earth, the chunky foreman, followed by the clan and the Boone cowhands, headed out through the driving mist almost directly on the mud-trail churned up by Neva Winters and her crew.

Boone fumbled with his saddle blanket, loosened the girth, tightened it, stalling for time. The funeral crowd still passed through the cemetery gate, a man here and there nodding to him; others keeping their heads turned away. It was tough on old friends to be lined up on different sides of a feud, but the situation could not have bred anything else.

Peering over his saddle, Boone singled out the tall, broad-shouldered, bulge-stomached Riggs, whose hands seemed never to leave their positions at the butts of his six-guns worn low on his thighs. When Riggs, closely followed by three of his hard-faced henchmen, drew abreast, Boone called, "Riggs!"

When the pouch-eyed real estate man jerked his chin up out of the fat folds of his jowls and strode insolently around Boone's horse, Boone said, "I'll take your price for those cows down in the stock-pens."

"T h e u g h t you would," Riggs chuckled. "So I had my check

ready." He drew the check from his vest pocket with his right hand, but changed it to his left before handing it over to Boone. He let his right hand fall quickly back to the butt of his gun.

"You needn't be afraid, Riggs," Boone's lips screwed about grimly at one corner of his mouth. "I'm not going to kill you—not yet; I'd want the check to get through the bank first for one reason."

Riggs chuckled, but there was no mirth in it. "Yeah?" he grunted.

For nearly ten seconds the sky-gray eyes of Bill Boone clashed with the red-rimmed yellowish ones of Ed Riggs. Riggs' three gunmen crowded closer, careful not to place themselves directly behind their employer, a typical gunman move to be out of the way of bullets aimed at their boss. Riggs jerked his eyes toward them. "It's all right," he grunted.

Boone took a paper from his vest pocket. "The bill of sale, Riggs. "I'll—"

Riggs snatched the paper from Boone's fingers and stuffed it into another pocket of his vest without looking at it, a force of habit gesture, for even he was accustomed to accepting the word of either a Boone or a Winters.

"If it's all right, Riggs," Boone told him thinly, "I'll sign it."

"Huh?" Riggs stuck a finger and thumb into the pocket. "You didn't—" He thrust the paper angrily toward Boone, who took it and straightened its rumpled folds upon the seat of his saddle. He started to sign, but stopped and swung around.

FOR SEVERAL tense, lightning-charged seconds, he glared into the cunning, yellow eyes before him. Slowly, then, levelly, every word weighed, "Riggs, you're a dirty, thieving, glob of scum! This is the bill of sale for Neva Winters' cattle. You paid her even less than you're paying me!" Boone's eyes narrowed. He added, his voice surpressed, low, "So she had to sell to you, too?"

"Which shouldn't make a Boone mad," Riggs leered, and Boone had to admit that the man had self-control. To be spoken to as Boone had just spoken to him, would anger any man. Well, Riggs was playing his cards for profit, and taking insult was part of that game.

Pushed too far, however, Boone knew that Riggs was deadly; he would not hesitate to give the signal to his hired gunmen who hovered back of him, dangerously alert.

It was a galling thing to discover that Riggs had beaten Neva Winters out of her stock, too, and a bitter thought to understand why this could be so easily accomplished. Grimly, he took the correct bill of sale from Riggs' fat hand and returned the one Neva had signed.

Riggs sneered, "Ain't my fault if th' Boones and th' Winters are always shootin' each other poor. I can't help it if you have to sell your stuff on a low market. Just so you can hire twice as many guns as you need because the feud's startin' all over again. It's just as good business for me to—"

"Shut up!"

Boone signed the bill of sale and thrust it into Rigg's hands. "Now, let me tell you a few things! Riggs, you've always played one man against another. Your father did before you. You've got rich at it. Own half Madrone—east half, thank Gawd! You and your rotten saloon crowd, and I'm glad there's a clean creek between your part and the west half of town where there're a few decent folks." He paused, climbed onto his horse.

The gunmen crowded closer, but Riggs jerked his head for them to get back.

Boone ignored the henchmen, focused his hard gaze upon their master. "You've always been mixed up in every feud in this country, Riggs. While the others shot each other to pieces, you reaped the profits. I don't know how you managed to stir up the feud this time, but you did it. Got Dad and old man Winters to kill each other. No proof, but I'm sure of it! It'd be just your style!"

Boone pulled his weather-beaten

hat farther down over his red hair, continued, "But I'm telling you this, Riggs, that someday we're going to fence off another graveyard—way back behind the others there—for you and your crowd. Wouldn't want to bury your kind with honest men—like those two."

He had spoken in a cold harsh tone but inwardly he felt himself shaken with rage. As he spoke he jerked his right thumb toward one side of the cemetery and his left toward the other, where dimly through the mist-like rain appeared the temporary wooden headboards of the graves of Sam Boone and John Winters.

Riggs grunted at his men. Untieing their horses from the long, pole hitchrack, they mounted and rode eastward at a plunging gait into Madrone. Riggs made no reply as he turned his back full upon Boone, mounted his own horse and trotted leisurely after them.

Boone watched, unconsciously weighing the evil worth of the man, until Riggs passed the entire length of Madrone's main street and clattered out upon the little bridge that crossed the clear, rippling waters of Madrone creek. Boone's teeth clicked together as he saw Riggs spit into the water and ride on into East Madrone.

The young owner of the Circle B, as the Boone range was known, swung into his saddle and headed westward toward the section line that divided his ranch—yes, his now, for Sam Boone, his father was dead—from the Boxed M spread, now headed, since her father's death, by Neva Winters.

The cemetery sexton, old Timothy Reegan, shaking his bald head, slowly shoved the graveyard gate shut with his frail body.

Chapter Two

NEVA WINTERS was waiting for him beneath the lightning-stripped oak on Madrone mesa when Boone rode up the steep trail. A bitter meeting—bitter because of the countless sweet meetings of the past. From this flat-topped tableland they had looked upon the two great ranges and dreamed and planned of the day when they would become one, when men no longer killed each other—after they had all become akin.

It was here he had first met Neva Winters; it would be here that they parted. He was glad that Neva thought of it that way. No common flash of anger, the hurling of his ring into his face—stormy, hurting words.

Boone said, "I'm here."

"I thought," the girl said calmly, though his first glance noted the traces of tears down her cheeks, "it'd be—better this way."

"Yes, it's better—this way."

They looked from each other's eyes out upon the ranges, mist-bound, dreary. Only two weeks back they'd been looking forward to the coming of spring, when countless millions of flowers would roll as an ocean of color before the westward breezes.

"A Winters has been killed," the girl said.

Boone replied wearily, "I've heard nothing since then except that a Boone has died—at the hand of a Winters."

"And there'll be more."

"Yes, Neva, there'll be more."

"But can't we stop it?"

"Not that easy, Neva. As head of the two clans, we merely represent their will. I've known them to—"

"It's terrible! I've known, too—what happens to clansmen who turn traitor! But it's a question of the meaning of what constitutes a traitor!"

"I loved my father," Boone said.

"And I loved mine!" Her voice was high, choking. But after a moment she got control of herself. "It's no use, Bill!"

She began pulling her left glove from her hand. Slipping the ring from her finger, she rode closer and held it out on her palm. Bill took both palm and ring with his right hand and suddenly reached out with his right arm and dragged her half

way from the saddle. He kissed her, and because she did not resist, kissed her again and again. Without a word he slipped the ring back onto her finger, kissed the hand, and allowed her to straighten in her saddle.

Wheeling his horse around, he rode down the mesa. She was still sitting beneath the old, battle-scarred oak when the mists swallowed her and he could no longer see.

Grim-jawed he rode toward the boundary line between the Circle B and the Boxed W where the new section of fence was going in. He tried to reconstruct as he rode the scene of two days before.

His father, Sam Boone, having brought in some registered cattle, had been supervising the building of a fence to hold th new stock. This fence followed the boundary line of the Winters spread on the west, except where Madrone creek crossed and recrossed the line for nearly a mile. Along this stretch, old Sam Boone had ordered the fence so built as to give his neighbor, John Winters, nearly all of the creek.

This he was careful to do, because of the feud that had been passed down to them from their fathers, and because he bore in mind the fearful slaughter of two years back when both families from a half dozen ranches had clashed at the headwaters of Madrone creek. There were many widows and orphans after the battle.

Now, those fatherless families, unable to make a success of their ranches, were almost destitute, living upon the charity of the rest of the clan. Many had allowed their ranches to go to the state for taxes and were moving back East. It was a bitter thing to see these once fine ranches, all fallen to ruin, and drifting into the hands of Ed Riggs, who purchased them from the state at a sum scandalously little more than the delinquent taxes. There was every reason to believe that another year or so would find Riggs in possession of the last acre of land once ruled by two mighty families, the Boones and the Winters who came fighting out of Tennessee.

But in running the fence down Madrone Creek, Sam Boone came to a point where the creek coursed abruptly into the Circle B and out again into Boxed W—Winters—ground. Here the old man directed that the fence range two hundred yards over the Boxed W as a matter of setting a better fence. Since he had seen to it that the Winters' clan benfited most, there was no cause for fighting, let alone cause enough for the two old timers to kill each other.

But this they had done—both were found dead at the fence, their guns close beside them, a bullet fired from each weapon. No one knew more than that, for the battle had occurred after the construction crew had gone home for the day.

Bill Boone, now riding slowly, stopped to check the new cattle just as the sun was setting in silvery brilliance beneath the low-swung clouds that were still clinging to the horizons. He went on then, studying the fence as he approached. And the deserted wagon, its load of posts, wire—everything had been left just as the cowhands had found it when they discovered the bodies.

Boone was within a few hundred yards of the wagon before he saw something that caused him to stand suddenly up in his stirrups, every sense on the alert. Someone had preceded him. He stared at the saddled horse, reins down, that stood just beyond the wagon. Urging his own mount into a gallop, he rounded the wagon and—halted with a quick jerk of the reins. His breath pumped in and out of his mouth in long, low swishes.

"Tex!" he gasped, flinging himself from the saddle. "What's wrong, Tex?"

He knelt quickly beside the man outstretched upon the ground, grasped his wrist, felt his pulse. Boone grew very still, trying to comprehend that Tex Kreen was dead, a bullet through his head.

SLOWLY Boone stood up, studying the country in all directions. He thought he heard the sound of

hoofs beyond a knoll in the direction of the Boxed W ranch buildings, but the sudden nickering of his own horse drowned out the sounds.

Spinning about, he glanced where the horse was looking. At that moment a rider plunged from a clump of willows far up the creek and vanished from sight over the knoll. His first impulse was to pursue the man, but realized that the fellow had too much lead ever to catch him in the thick chaparral. It would take only two minutes at the most for the fellow to lose himself in that thorn-cursed wilderness.

Confused, trying to understand that here lay one of the finest men he had ever met, Boone hauled off his slicker and shook it out to spread over Tex's body. He would have to send some of the boys to take Tex to Madrone in the wagon. He stopped to draw the slicker over the body, but at that instant a bullet clipped through the crown of his hat. His horse snorted and b o l t e d, checked only now and then by stepping on its reins.

Boone rushed after the animal, only to find himself surrounded by riders. He looked into the barrels of a half dozen six-guns, and—into two glaring, hazel eyes, tigerish in the dying sunset.

"Neva!"

"Get his gun, boys!" Her voice was cold and clear. She glanced at the white face of Tex Kreen against the muddy ground, swung her head toward Boone. "You would try to make me believe in you!"

"Why, Neva, you don't think I—"

"No, of course not!" she cut him short. "Oh!" Her face was bloodless in the fading sunset. "I'm so sick of this beastly range!" She brushed her horse with a spur and plunged away at a long, hard gallop. Chin touching her shoulder, she called back, "Turn him over to Sheriff Beckman when you take Tex into Madrone!"

SEVERAL men unloaded the wire and posts from the near-by wagon while the others prepared makeshift harness from their lariats by fastening the ends to wagon tongue and saddle horns. Carefully, others lifted the body of Tex Kreen and laid it upon the wagon bed. No one spoke to Boone for the moment, or he to anyone. Every man of them moved slowly, as if the presence of the dead demanded it.

Finally the party got under way and a Winters' puncher riding up beside Boone growled, "That bullet went through the back of Tex's head."

Boone said nothing. Explanation was futile. He rode along then, absorbed in thought, his horse led by the reins in the hands of a Boxed W puncher, and completely surrounded by expert gun handlers.

The more he considered the matter the more he decided that he should have taken a chance against the Winters' six-guns and ridden after the horseman who had pounded away from the scene of the killing. There could be no doubt that the man was the murderer of Tex Kreen.

Still, Boone realized that he could not have proved anything on the fellow had he overhauled him; Boone hadn't seen him fire the shot. And even if he could persuade the Winters' hands to make a search now, the killer would be out in open country far to the north and circling back toward town. Toward East Madrone, for Boone had little doubt that he belonged to that hell-hole of the West.

"Only a favor to Neva that we're takin' you into Madrone, Boone," another puncher grated, the first time the fellow had spoken. "Otherwise we'd just finish th' job on th' first strong limb."

Boone leaned wearily back against his saddle cantle, conscious of the cowhand's trend of thought, but scarcely caring. They could take him into Madrone, but Sheriff Beckman would turn him loose on his own word to appear when called. No one could prove that he had done the murder, and allowing himself to be taken in to the sheriff was a mere formality. Better that than to have

resisted, to resist now.

The misty rain had stopped with the sunset, but water sloshed unceasingly from beneath the feet of the horses; the wagon wheels ground through the mud with a clucking, sucking sound, monotonously on and on. Only a weak spot of light showed where the sun had gone down, and mesquite stood against the skyline as a parade of dark, unearthly shapes. One of the Winters' riders, trotting along some hundred feet in advance of the party, wheeled his horse and came riding back at a dead run. He pointed to the high ridge ahead. "Look! Bound to be Circle B's!"

Riding hard, dark bulks along the horizon, galloped nearly a dozen riders. Guns leaped from Boxed W holsters all around Boone. The wagon stopped, and the riders who had been pulling it with their lariats hurriedly unfastened the ropes.

"They're two to one!" a Winters' puncher rasped out. "Damn 'em!"

"Wait!" Boone cracked the ensuing silence. "Better let me handle this! Give me my reins and I'll stop this fight before it begins!"

Silence. Then a Winters' hand snarled, "You'll what? Turn you loose and let you help blast us? Why, damn yore crust!"

"All right!" Boone snapped. "Have it your way! But there's sure going to be merry hell break loose in about two minutes. Some of you fellows are bound to be killed. If you'll let me, I'll ride ahead and stop 'em. After that job's done, I'll come back and give myself up to you. I don't want any more accursed killing."

"Like hell you'd give yourself up!"

For some thirty more seconds no one spoke. The thundering pound of hoofs came nearer. Their own horses sloshed mud with an impatient stamping of their hoofs. Here and there the rasp of somebody's heavy breathing added to the tenseness. Death rode toward them; there was no doubt of that, but loyalty to their own clan demanded that they meet it.

"Hell!" one of them exploded. "We'll never make it if we run for it! They're comin' in from all sides!"

"Listen, you guys!" another spoke quickly. "Boone or no Boone, I've never heard of one of 'em goin' back on his word. He'll do what he says!"

"All right!" the first man spat out. "Try it! Turn him loose!"

Boone grasped his bridle reins from the man who tossed them back to him over his horse's head. He raked his mount with a spur and plunged forward. When he was within a hundred yards of the oncoming riders, he shouted, "Lig!"

Horses ground to a stop, circled, stamped. The Circle B riders lowered their guns.

"Thought a bunch of Boxed W headed this way? Gettin' too dark to see though—down here off th' ridge. Who're those fellers with you?" Lig Starr whirled his horse alongside Boone.

"They're Winters men all right, but fellows, listen to me!"

"What'n hell's up, Bill?" Starr reeled in the reins of his rearing, impatient mount. "I don't get it!"

"Just this," Boone put a hand on Starr's arm. "Somebody shot Tex Kreen dead. Out by the new line fence. I came along and was investigating when the Winters' bunch blew up and—well, I got the credit for doing the job, of course."

"Hell, boss, they can't get away with that!" Starr pulled his horse away. "We'll blast 'em all to—"

"No, Lig," Boone broke in, riding close, "we've had enough of this killing already. I'm going into town with 'em. Like I promised. The sheriff'll turn me loose."

"Not so damn' sure of that!" Lig banged out. "There's something dogoned funny about this whole setup."

CIRCLE B hands growled all around Boone, and it was plain that they were in an ugly mood, but no one made a move to plunge forward to the attack. They knew better; Bill Boone's word on the Circle

B spread was law. Swinging his horse around, he rode back to the waiting Boxed W group, and once more the funeral cortege ground monotonously on through the mud.

It was a long time before the procession passed the cemetery. A globe-smoked lantern burned beside the first few shovelsful of earth thrown out of a new grave. Old Timothy Reegan laid aside his shovel and came over to the cemetery gate, the smudgy lantern slowly swinging from one of his shriveled hands.

A Winters puncher asked, "What's goin' on here?"

"Diggin' th' grave," old Reegan grinned.

The puncher reined angrily to a halt. "Whose grave?"

"Thought I'd get started tonight."

"I said whose grave, damn you!"

Old Reegan cackled, came on outside the cemetery fence. "Wait till I shut this gate and I'll ride into my place with you."

"Listen, you!" Boone's voice, a fierce growl, brought the old man to a trembling halt. "Are you telling us you're already digging Tex Kreen's grave?"

"Just that!" the old man snapped, anger running through the words like ink in a glass of milk. But as no one spoke, he added in a more moderate, though cackling, tone, "One of Ed Riggs' men rode in a half hour ago—from the Boxed W. Th' Winters' girl sent word by him."

"Th' hell you say!" one of the Winters' cowhands exploded. "You know, Reegan, I don't like th' way you cut ice three ways. Ed Riggs gets you elected coroner and you get a fee from that. Then Riggs puts up money for you to build an undertaking den—so you get a fee out of that. You've already got th' sexton's job, and folks pay you good for that, too. Maybe that's why I don't like your snickerin' attitude or—"

"Aw, shut up!" Boone cut the angry puncher short. "Let him alone!"

"Yeah?" the puncher snapped back. "I've been itchin' a hell of a long time to give this old buzzard a piece of my mind. No wonder old man Boone horsewhipped him for stealin', then sent him over to old man Winters to get a job. He knew John Winters'd catch him pilferin' sooner or later and give him another lickin'. Which he did—a damn' good'n! Ten years ago, that was, but I'll bet this old carrion ain't forgot it none!"

The old man, cackling maliciously, and shaking his bald head, weirdly illuminated by his smoking lantern, slowly swung the cemetery gate shut. Without asking anyone's permission, he climbed aboard the death wagon and perched there, cackling, on the sideboard, while the vehicle rolled slowly on into town.

Chapter Three

THE CORTEGE stopped in front of the old man's undertaking establishment, mysterious from the outside because of the sunburned paper over all the windows, dreary inside because the paper shut out nearly all the light. The Boxed W riders went inside with Tex Kreen's body—all except one of the crew left behind to guard Boone.

"Back in a minute!" one of the men called to the guard. "We'll take him down to th' sheriff then. Better keep your eye on him." The door closed behind the fellow.

Silence. Boone curled a cigarette and struck a match. He was about to apply the flame when he saw the nose of a rifle barrel creep slowly around the corner of the building, faintly alight in the flickering blaze of Reegan's dirty lantern, now sitting on the doorstep.

"Look out!" he shouted to the Winters puncher.

Too late.

The rifle blazed, and the quiet evening was broken by its loud crash. Boone, not realizing soon enough that the bullet had already done its work, drove his horse against the puncher's mount in an effort to knock him out of range. At that instant he saw a widening stain over

the man's heart and knew that he was dead in his saddle.

The gun spoke again, and Boone felt a sudden numbness above his collarbone. Unarmed, he plunged toward the gunman, aiming his horse at him as he would a bullet, intending to ride him down. He heard the Winters puncher thud against the ground and the grinding of the hoofs of the man's mount. Then—he rounded the corner of the building in a single, rearing plunge.

But he saw no one, for the feeble lantern light extended only a short distance. He spurred the horse on the full length of the building, stopped. Nothing—save the slow drip of water draining from the moss-covered shingles of the undertaking parlor roof and the pitch darkness of the night. Swinging his horse around, he rode back toward the corner of the building, but halted just short of the light at the blast of language coming from the gathering crowd.

"This's Boone's work! He must've had a hidden gun!"

"Go get Sheriff Beckman!"

"Which way'd Boone go? Anybody see? Toward th' Circle B?"

A moment of silence.

"But I'm tellin' you he didn't have no gun! I did that searchin' job!"

"Just th' same, law or no law, I'm goin' to put a bullet in him! There's no need of a sheriff in this fight. I thought he was actin' too damn' nice for it to amount to anything—just comin' along with us so peaceful-like! Hell!"

"Let's get him!"

Men hurriedly yanked their lariats off their saddle horns and unloosened them from the wagon. They appeared as dim bulks to Boone—who watched them from the deep shadows between the buildings—as they mounted and stamped about. Boone set his teeth at the pain in his shoulder, waited.

"Let's finish this Boone business once for all time! Come on! We're ridin' for th' Circle B right now!"

The hoofs of pounding, galloping horses beat dully on the rainsoaked street. Men shouted to each other; their voices flung against the wet buildings seemed to stick there like mud. Scarcely conscious of what was happening, Boone bent over his saddle horn in pain. He knew that he must get his wound bandaged or he would soon bleed to death, but he could take no chances with those unreasoning, angry men.

Lights began to show across porch fronts up and down the street as doors were thrown open. The townspeople were rushing toward the wagon and the fallen puncher from the Winters spread. No Boxed W men remained.

"He's dead!" a townsman exclaimed.

"Who is he?" asked another.

"Who were those men ridin' out of town in such a hurry?"

Boone urged his horse around the corner and close to the dead puncher. "He's one of my men," he lied to gain time. "I'm winged, too; somebody tie up my shoulder."

HALF FALLING, half sliding, he lowered himself to the ground. One of the bystanders bound his wound tightly with strips torn from Boone's shirt. Just beyond the crowd, Boone caught sight of old Reegan, aided by another man, carrying the puncher's body inside the building.

"I'll take care of his gun," Boone staggered through the crowd and lifted the dead man's weapon against old Reegan's quick protest. Someone swung the lantern nearer the puncher's body.

"Say, this's a Boxed W man!" The speaker swung on Boone. "Why, I thought you said he was one of—"

Boone waited to hear no more. Explanations would be useless. The feud was too well known for that. Before anyone could take action, he was in his saddle. Bending low over his horse's mane, he pounded out of town.

As he galloped on, he inspected his newly acquired gun. It was loaded and in good working order. He was glad that the Boxed W cowhands

had not relieved him of his full cartridge belt. He would probably need every bullet in it. If the Boxed W attacked the Circle B, there was but one thing to do—fight!

Boone's thoughts were bitter. He had promised Neva Winters that no Boone would ever kill another Winters. He had lived up to that, though to her it probably did not appear that way. He believed that his father had lived up to that promise, too—at least until he had been forced to fire in self-defense. Marks on the ground at the scene of the battle had indicated that the elder Boone had fired only after he had been shot down. Anyhow, the final showdown had now come. The Circle B was being attacked; the Circle B would be defended to the last man. He urged his horse from a gallop into a dead run.

Abruptly he turned from the road that meandered toward the Circle B by way of level Madrone Creek ground. He would cut off more than two miles by going through the rough country over the hills that looked down upon Circle B headquarters.

A peculiar flashing brightness beyond the ridge caused him to peer around. In the east, the moon was breaking through low-hanging clouds—the rain was definitely over. It was a full moon, and it seemed to travel in the wrong direction as the clouds raced by it. It appeared to roll along a distant hilltop to the north of Madrone. With little figures fluttering across its face—Boone squinted more closely.

"Riders," he pondered. He halted a moment. "Who?"

The last horseman of the cavalcade leaped across the moon's disc, came pounding down the hill, almost directly toward him. Listening, he knew that the party was coming fast.

Ahead, on the longer route, he knew, without doubt, were the Winters cowhands. His own crew was at home. Then who? He spoke to his horse and sent him clattering around the curve of a hill to keep from appearing against the skyline.

The horse, at last starting to tire, slowed from a run to a gallop, to a trot, and then quickly jolted into a walk. For several minutes, Boone allowed the animal to proceed leisurely along to regain its natural breathing. He was about to put the horse to a trot when the brightness he had before noticed in the sky beyond the hill again caught his attention. This time it was much brighter, and could be no reflection of the moon.

"Fire!" he exclaimed, and turned the horse directly over the hilltop. "Bullets or no bullets, cowhorse, we've got to chance it! That fire's at the Circle B!"

On the crest of the hill he stopped, stunned. There wasn't a single building that wasn't on fire. Men ran here and there between him and the burning structures, flaming torches in their hands. Some remained mounted, motionless, watching.

With an angry cry, Boone set both spurs to his horse's sides, and the little beast plunged recklessly down the hill. Angrily, Boone wondered where his own men were. Had they deliberately disobeyed his orders? Had the Winters crew caught them unawares and slaughtered them? It couldn't be. He thought of the riders he had seen coming on behind him. They might be his men. But why there? He had ordered them to go home.

As he rode full tilt down the hill, he heard the bawl of cattle off to his right. Turning his head, he saw several white-faced steers milling over the top of a ridge. While he watched, the whole herd of registered cattle plunged into view, driven by a large group of horsemen.

On the instant, the riders saw him. One of their number spurred madly around the herd and rode toward him. Lig Starr! Starr, spinning his horse to signal to the riders behind, shouted, "Fire!"

The entire group plunged toward the blazing buildings leaving the cattle to shift for themselves. Boone waited for the riders to come near, his left hand weakly holding onto his bridle reins, his right pressed

hard against his pain-stabbed shoulder. He was dizzy, faint. If he could last the ride out, this would be the finish of the Winters-Boone feud.

WITH A shout, guns drawn, the Circle B hands plunged up, past, as though they had not seen him. He had a hard time spurring his horse near to Starr's excited, plunging mount.

"Where've you been, Lig? I thought I told you men to go home and—"

"I know, boss!" Starr shouted above the pounding hoofs. "But when we got home, them new cattle had been stolen. Somebody cut th' fence and drove 'em off! We couldn't find anybody, but we trailed fast and got th' cows back!"

Riders began to draw back to allow the long line to form abreast, and Boone and Lig pounded into it. A long charging line, guns glinting with the light from the burning ranch buildings.

Beyond, the Winters' hands also formed a long line. Only minutes now before the two lines would crash! And—men die! Numbly Boone thought how trivial human life seemed at such moments. How little it meant when people's rights were attacked. A damned odd world! Another minute now! Less!

He raked back the hammer of his gun. The Winters line swept toward them—a broad semicircle, like a giant scythe swirling to mow down any man in its path. There were brave men in those two lines. A shame that they had to cut each other down! Suddenly, in spite of all the damage done to him, he knew that he must prevent more slaughter. He spurred his horse out in front of his own plunging riders.

"Back!" he ordered. "Wait!"

But he might as well have ordered back a roaring prairie fire. The line swept past him in a cursing, screaming attack. Without warning Boone's strength went from him. He bent slowly down upon his saddle horn, grasping desperately to keep from falling, his ears strained for the first shot.

Gaining a little vitality, he forced himself to sit up in the saddle, only to stare unbelieving at the scene before him. Midway between the two irregular lines of stamping horses, hatless, her dark hair whipping with every toss of her head and glinting in the light from the leaping flames, Neva Winters spun around on her big black horse. A gun in her hand rose and fell with the sway of the animal.

"I said," she shouted, "that there'll be no killing! Who set those buildings on fire?"

"Why, we—" a puncher began.

"I told you men to take Bill Boone in to the sheriff! And you come out here and burn down his ranch buildings!" She swung alongside Boone. "I'll pay back every cent—somehow. Why, what's the matter? Here, you men! He's shot!"

That was all that Boone remembered clearly. He was conscious that he fell, that he made a futile effort to grasp the saddle horn on his way down. To his ears came a sudden burst of gunfire. Gun flashes seemed to spurt from every point of the encircling wall of darkness.

Neva Winters snapped a command. He was too faint to understand; too weak to care. The earth felt good under him. He stretched full length upon it, dimly conscious, pleased, that Neva Winters on her great, plunging, black horse seemed to be everywhere. A peculiar thing—she appeared to be commanding both clans, Winters and Boones alike.

And then he knew what had happened. Circle B and Boxed W cowhands had been surprised by a common enemy, an unknown enemy, that blazed away hotly at them from the darkness beyond the burning buildings. Things grew swimmy before his gaze; he turned his face to the wet earth. It was cool—cool—queer, he seemed to see bald-headed old Reegan grinning at him from the darkness and—slowly closing the cemetery gate.

Chapter Four

"KEEP DOWN! Don't let him get up!"

Strong hands held Boone back until his head struck something solid. A six-gun thundered nearby.

"What's going on here?" he asked, twisting on his side to see.

"Got company," growled a Boxed W man at his elbow.

Brain now beginning to clear, Boone studied his surroundings. He was lying on the wet, thirty-foot bottom of the Circle B's huge ground water-tank. Scattered around inside the tank's two and a half-foot circular wall, with smoking guns in their hands, were the combined forces of the Circle B and Boxed W.

Sitting near him, her face buried on her knees, was Neva Winters. Boone started to speak, but caught a signal from Lig Starr on his right. Cautiously, Lig rose and peered through a notch in a stave where the tank was made to overflow just before it filled completely with water.

A cloudless sunrise. Wisps of steam from a water-burdened range. There was not a single Circle B building standing. Stray coils of smoke roped gently up from the ashes. Two dead horses lay several hundred yards apart. All the other mounts, still saddled, some with reins dragging, were huddled near the corral fence.

Completely surrounding Circle B headquarters, protected from injury by the distance, riflemen pumped lead into the waterlogged, cypress tank. Each bullet sank with a smack into the thick staves, unable to penetrate more than half way. Boone settled back on the slippery floor of the tank. Neva Winters stared at him with tired, hazel eyes.

"Bill," she said, twisting the brim of a borrowed hat, "it looks as if this is the end. I don't know how to say it strong enough; all I can say is that I'm terribly sorry."

"Listen, Neva, I'm all in the dark on this—what's happening? Guess I sort of got knocked out."

"You did," the girl replied, sliding closer along the floor of the tank. "Ed Riggs is out there with every gunman he's ever imported into East Madrone."

"What!"

"Fact. He was right behind you when you rode in last night—you and your boys. He'd sent a bunch of men to get your cattle, but your hands spoiled his game. When he rode out to meet his rustlers and found them hot-footing it into town, he turned them around and brought his whole gang over here." She paused, her eyes glowing tigerishly, went on, "He arrived just in time to see your men and mine ride at each other like maniacs. So when he noticed how things were turning out, he decided to kill all of us—both sides. It was a perfect set-up for him. He could tell anybody who asked that the feud had wiped out all of us." She hesitated, added, "It was Riggs who shot you and my man back at town."

Boone ground out, "Had it nicely figured—buy our land for back taxes!"

He glanced around at the men in the tank. Some were lying on their arms asleep; others waited ready to fire the instant one of the attackers came within six-gun range. He counted them—twenty men in all.

"Where's the rest of the boys?" he asked.

She nodded to indicate the ground beyond the tank. "Dead," she said in a throaty whisper, and again lowered her head upon her knees. A groan escaped her lips. She murmured, "I'm so terribly sick of all this killing! It's horrible! I know now that Ed Riggs has been back of the whole thing—always stirring up the feud and profiting from it. He's accumulated his fortune that way. Blood money!" Her voice got lower and lower. "Blood! Madrone Range has been nothing but a battlefield for forty years. It ought to be called Blood Range! I—it—" Her voice

broke, and Boone put his right arm around her.

"There now!" he soothed.

It started as a friendly gesture, his arm quietly reassuring, but as he held it about her shoulders he found himself pulling her fiercely to him, holding her tightly, as if he were afraid to let her go, afraid that he would lose her forever. Through moist eyes, she smiled at him and gently removed his arm. Boone glanced about in time to see Lig Starr exchange winks with a Boxed W cowhand. He glanced back at the girl, only to find her face flushed almost as red as his own burning ears.

"Keep your head down there!" The warning came from Starr. He was almost too late, for a bullet cut the air just above Boone's head.

"How does Riggs think he can get away with this thing?" Boone turned angrily to his foreman. "He can't do wholesale murder in this man's country!"

"Maybe not," admitted Starr, "but I've spent all night tryin' to figure out what's to keep him from it. It's a question of waitin' around till we starve out. When we make a break for it, all he has to do is to shoot us down with those long-range rifles."

"Doesn't he think anyone ever comes out this way?"

"Sure! He just lets 'em come and shoots 'em down from ambush. And th' first one happens to be Sheriff Beckman himself!"

"No!" Boone's jaws set until they seemed sculptured of stone. He said nothing more for a long time, thinking of Riggs' thoroughness—the sheriff? Finally, Boone asked, "How about sneaking up on 'em tonight?"

"With a full moon lighting up every inch of ground?" Starr grunted. "Look at that sky—th' rain's over."

"Haven't we a single rifle in this bunch?" Boone searched around the tank with his gaze.

"No," Starr replied. "And six-guns won't carry half that distance."

"Hmm?" was all that Boone had to say to that.

He stared at the wet floor of the tank, at the drain-hole, where someone had knocked out the plug to let the water escape when the men were desperately searching last night for some kind of protection from the hail of lead. Beside the hole lay the axe with which the job had been done. Absurdedly he thought how he'd like to bring the butt end of that axe down upon Riggs' head.

DISGUSTED with his wild, useless thoughts, he twisted about to ease the pressure on his injured shoulder. For an instant his eyes met those of Neva Winters, and once more his ears burned red. Something violent stirred in him.

His eyes turned hypnotically toward the axe, the implement becoming a fascinating weapon. Hazy, wild ideas—then, crashing through his hot brain, an idea came clearly to focus. With that axe? It might work. It was worth trying. He wanted to shout his plan, but held himself in check, and calmly went over each detail of it before he spoke. At last, when he was sure that his reasoning was right and that his wild thoughts were workable, he plunged into action.

"Lig!" he whispered. "Listen! We'll cut holes in the tank bottom—just big enough to let a man's body through, so he can grip the sides of the hole and lift the tank up around him. Around fifteen holes—that many men ought to lift it."

Lig Starr stared. "Are you gone nuts?"

"A dozen holes, a dozen men lifting until the floor comes up to their waists—they rush forward. Riggs won't get wise to what's happening till we've run a hundred feet or so. By that time his gang'll be so flustered they won't know what to do—except run maybe."

"By golly, maybe it would—" Starr began, only to have Boone break in on him. "If we get in range, we'll have the advantage—behind the tank wall as a breastworks. Riggs and his bunch'll be out in the open."

"What's to keep 'em from hittin' our legs underneath?" Starr, asked, pursing his lips skeptically. "I'll admit our whole upper parts would be protected, but—" He broke off with a grin and rubbed his shins thoughtfully.

Several of the men nearest looked one to the other, looked first at Boone's wounded shoulder and then at his face. Boone was silent for a long time. The question of workability was a real one. Then, too, he had been injured, had been senseless, and they could well wonder whether his brain was properly functioning.

"If they plug our legs—" a puncher began.

Boone broke in, all doubt gone from his mind, "There'll be several of us not able to help carry the tank—be riding on what's left of the tank floor after you get through chopping the holes in it. We'll stick our hats up over the edge of the tank wall on the end of our guns, draw their fire. They probably won't even think to take a shot at the legs showing below."

"It'll work!" Starr was as enthusiastic now as he was doubtful a moment before. "They'll plug them hats for all they're worth. Before they get wise they're sievin' headgear, we'll be right near 'em, set th' tank down and—" He didn't finish; he jerked his gun from its holster and replaced an empty cartridge with a live one.

"All right, boys!" Boone directed. "Come over here! Careful, keep down low!"

Quickly he set one of them to work chopping the first hole, designating the others that were in turn to proceed with the work.

"I want you, Starr, to hold up a couple of hats on the east side when we start up. I'll do the same on the south, and—"

The girl broke in, "And Neva Winters will take the north."

"She will not!" Boone turned to her. "I'm not going to have you all shot up by those polecats! You'll sit right where you are till it's all over!"

"That's what you think!" She opened the breech of her gun and examined the full cylinder. Satisfied, she thrust the weapon back in her holster. When she finally looked at Boone again, her hazel eyes had a tigerish look in them.

"Hmmm!" Boone found other instruction to give in a different quarter. "When we get started toward 'em, you fellows be sure to step high enough each time—so you won't trip over a rock or skid in the mud."

Chips flew, sodden, across the length of the tank from the swinging axe. The job was slow because the chopping had to be done in a cramped, kneeling position. Let a head appear for an instant above that two and a half-foot cypress wall and a bullet would plow through it. Man after man took his turn at the chopping. An hour passed.

"Don't get those holes too close together," Boone cautioned. "We've got to have enough bottom left to lift the tank with."

The chopping went on. As the minutes dragged by, one of the boys tried the value of a hat on the end of his gun barrel. Three bullet-holes went through it before he could jerk it down. The remainder of the men sat silently waiting. One or two, heavy with sleep, nodded, jerked themselves awake at the noise of the gun explosions. Fourteen holes were already done.

More time slid by. The sun got hot overhead. Boone began giving last-minute instructions, noting now that the last hole was nearly finished.

"We'll try to make the bunch behind that boulder first. Half way up the south hill there. From the way they've been firing, most of them must be hiding out in that direction." He paused, looked around. The fifteenth hole—almost done.

"That's her!" the last puncher to cut out a hole called huskily. "Where's my gunbelt?"

"Every man in his place?" Boone asked. "Guns fully loaded? Take a look just to be sure they're all right."

Hammers clicked, breeches broke, snapped shut again. Leather scraped

as the guns went home in their holsters. A puncher grasped up the axe and cut the hole, in which he now stood, a trifle larger. Propping himself so that his bullet-smashed shoulder would be supported against the side of the tank, and taking one last look to see that everything was in order, Boone turned to the men squatting low in the holes, hands gripped, tensely waiting.

"Ready!" He raised his right hand level with his shoulder, dropped it, and with the same motion brought his six-gun from its holster.

AS IF SOME strange monster had risen suddenly from a muddy bog, the tank rose and glided forward. One of the men tripped, but the others carried him along until he had gained his feet. Growling at his failure, he dug his fingers into the tank bottom and rushed on.

"Stick up the hats!" Boone thrust his own just above the edge of the tank.

Nothing happened. He raised it farther. A bullet ploughed through it. Another. He jerked the hat down, put it up a few feet to his left. Bullets sang too fast to count them. The men carrying the tank began to slow under its weight and the weight of those they carried; the strain was telling upon them.

"More to the right, boys!" Boone shouted, again shifting his hat along the top of the tank. "Scoot farther around, Lig! Hey, there, watch out! Neva! Don't! Down!"

The girl in her excitement had risen almost full height. Boone's sky-gray eyes met her hazel ones. For a moment they clashed. She ducked down, and slowly began to smile. Painfully he turned back to his position, thrust his hat once more above the edge of the tank. The old hat had so many bullet-holes in it now that the crown was in tatters. The struggling cowhands, now stumbling sharply uphill, could scarcely walk.

"Let it down!" Boone ordered. "We're near enough to that boulder!"

The tank dropped. Instantly a group of men fled from behind the boulder and rushed toward their horses farther beyond. Forgetting his exposed position, Boone rose on both feet, his six-gun blazing.

Riggs' men swung about, firing from their hips. Bullets whined. Boone crouched again—hurriedly. Circle B and Boxed W hands, kneeling behind their strange barricade, poured a steady stream of lead from their six-guns. A Riggs man rose from behind a second and smaller boulder off to the left. Boone's gun leaped sideways, as if he were about to toss it away. It bucked—the man rolled down the incline.

A six-gun was crashing viciously by Boone's right ear. A momentary glance.

"Neva!"

Smoke swirled about her. Boone jerked his aim onto a kneeling rifleman thirty yards directly ahead.

Yelling men. Fleeing, hard-pounding riders; men desperately putting distance between them and those deadly, rapid-fire six-guns. Sudden silence—the battle was over.

Out of pistol range, other Riggs gunmen rose and plunged after their fleeing leader. Circle B and Boxed W hands clambered over the tank and ran back downhill toward their own mounts.

"Wait!" Boone ordered. "Let 'em go! They'll pick you off with those rifles!" And when the cowboys came growling back, "They'll head for town, and now that their hand is shown they'll be leaving for good tonight."

"They will like hell!" Lig Starr exploded. "Not if I get there first!"

"That's just it," agreed Boone. "We will hit first. Tonight, we smash East Madrone!"

He had a shout for an answer. One cowboy threw his hat into the air and fired a bullet through it. "Fer luck!" he yipped.

It was mid-afternoon before a puncher sent to bring a wagon and team from the Winters spread arrived. Loading the dead of both sides into the wagon, the procession headed for Madrone.

Neva said, "Bill, it's been nothing but funerals—for a week. It's a ghastly price to pay—for peace."

Boone nodded. She was right—But human affairs were always like that. Side by side, they made little conversation after that, each involved in solemn thought.

Slowly the group passed Madrone cemetery. Like some unearthly apparition in the dying sun, old Reegan came down the lanes of tombstones with a shovel on his shoulder. As the group rode by, he grinned at them—a wicked-looking, snarly grin—and slowly shoved shut the cemetery gate.

Chapter Five

IT WAS A determined, fighting-mad range army that trooped into Madrone and drew up at the undertaking parlor of Reegan's. Horses stamped. Men spoke in low tones, unloaded the dead. Before they were through, the last color of sunset had died and the full moon was rising.

"Bill," said Neva Winters, "I'm going over to the drygoods store and rouse up somebody. I want some decent burial clothes for my dead. I'll look out for your boys, too."

Boone watched her cross the street, disappear, then swung to the riders about him. "Boys, the chances are some of us won't come through this thing alive. If any of you want to back out, nobody's going to blame you. But if you go into it, give it everything you've got. Here's the first real chance we've ever had to clean Madrone Range for all time. This time we don't fight each other, but a rattlesnake that'd bite us both."

Nobody moved. One of the punchers grunted, "Go on!"

"That's all there is to it," Boone continued. "Except let's get going before Neva Winters comes back. I want several of you men to ride across the bridge at an easy trot. Keep going till you pass all the way through East Madrone and out the other side. Then half of you swing left and half right. Scatter out and come up close behind the buildings in the rear." He paused. Again only the stamping of impatient horses. A door slammed somewhere over in East Madrone. "The rest of you divide up equally with Lig Starr and me. Lig, you take the right side, and I'll take the left; that's the side Ed Riggs' office is on. Everybody ready?"

"Let's go!" One of the Boxed W men shook out his reins, and his mount plunged forward.

"Wait!" Boone cracked out, and when the cowboy whirled his mount around. "I want to pick the fellows to go through town first. You can be one of them. And you!" Hurriedly he selected the men, alternating between Circle B and Boxed W hands. "If you can take 'em alive, all right, and we'll hand 'em over to the law. But don't take chances; if a man doesn't drop his gun when you tell him to, don't argue; don't let even one man get away."

"Let's go!" Several men shouted it at once this time.

"All right, go! When you reach the other side of town, the rest of us will ride in from this end."

But things didn't work out as they had planned. The first riders had scarcely crossed the bridge when a blast of bullets swept the street. A horse tumbled over on its head, its rider flung into the air.

"Come on!" Boone raked his mount with both spurs. "Across the bridge! Lig, you and your men! Get in behind the buildings on this end. Half of you on one side; half on the other. My bunch will take the street!"

The wooden bridge rattled like the sudden roll of hail on a slab-board cabin. Every building seemed to spurt flame. East Madrone was a hell of leaden death. There were no lights in the buildings; only a murky dusk upon the street. Horses plunged, screamed.

"Get off your horses!" Boone shouted. "Up against the buildings! Close!"

He was already dismounted, run-

ning, half crouched, toward Ed Riggs' office. The door was locked. A pane of glass crashed next to it. Boone felt the bullet tug at his sleeve.

In the next moment he could see nothing through the boiling smoke from his own gun. He threw his body against the door, but involuntarily cried out in pain as his injured shoulder struck full force. Stunned for a moment, he hesitated. The street along its full length was a leaping mass of gunfire and darting forms. Two cowpunchers at that instant crashed into Riggs' darkened saloon, jets of fire spurting from their guns. What happened inside, Boone could only guess. In less than a minute, they walked out and calmly inserted fresh cartridges in their guns.

Again Boone tried the door of Ed Riggs' office, only to realize that it must have a heavy bar behind it. He gave up the job and ran around behind the building. The rear door was open.

Cautiously he crept up beside it, listening intently, but the din in the street out front was so severe that he could hear nothing. With a sudden whirling motion he rolled around the door-facing and along the wall inside the building, his gun-arm jerking from side to side, ready to spit death.

Sliding carefully along the wall, he crept toward the front office. A bullet crashed through the door from the street. Pausing, he studied the semi-darkness, Riggs' desk, tables, chairs, a pot-bellied stove in the path of a beam of moonlight slanting through a high window. The room was vacant. He turned, started toward the rear door, stopped. The heavy shadow of a man was framed in the doorway.

"Ed!" the fellow called out. "Ed!"

Boone hunched against the wall. The man came on, stumbling over chairs. He struck the corner of a table and cursed.

"Ed!" he yelled hoarsely. "We've got th' girl! Over at th' drygoods store!"

"Get your paws up, feller!" Boone's command ripped out like the blast of a gun.

"Why, you dirty—" The Riggs henchman drowned his own words with two quick-roaring blasts of his gun. His third bullet crashed into the ceiling, for he was falling backward with Boone's slug through his middle before he had time to squeeze the trigger. Boone swept the man's gun as he rushed past his body. There'd be three cartridges in the gun anyway.

WONDERING where Riggs had gone, Boone plunged through the rear doorway and around the building into the street again. It took but a few seconds for him to rush across the blazing inferno. Stooping below windows, darting past doors, hesitating between buildings—the minutes seemed to be made of hours.

A chunky, cursing man ran from a door directly into his path, saw him, halted. Instantly both guns blazed, but in that fraction of a second, Boone had thrown himself to the sidewalk. A single blast upward from his gun struck the barrel-like midships of the Riggs gunman, who rolled heavily from the sidewalk into the mud.

Boone rushed on, reloading both his own gun and the gun he had taken from the dead man in Riggs' office. Whinnying, screaming horses circled at the bridge. He had difficulty in plowing his way through the kicking, squealing mass. He struck the drygoods store front door with his uninjured shoulder, but the lock held. He didn't wait to try a second time. He backed away and hurled his body, back first, through a front window.

"Neva!" he shouted, even before the shattered glass had ceased to fall.

Silence. He rushed to the rear of the store, disregarding all caution. A partition door was closed. He crashed through it as if it were paper.

"Neva!"

"Lookout, Bill! They're closing in behind you!"

Guns blazed. It was too late to duck, or think of anything else. It was a question of marksmanship. There could be no retreat. He counted his shots; he counted theirs. He could see only their dim forms in the gun-flashes. They were shooting with jerky movements. No excited man could shoot straight, he told himself, and these men were firing in mortal fear.

"Calm down!" Boone hissed to himself. "Take your time. There!" He held his aim an instant longer, carefully squeezed the trigger. A scream, a heavy fall. "Take it slow!" he rasped out to himself. He drew his gun down, eased it up until he was sure the sight blotted out his target. The man's gun crashed, and Boone felt a sting somewhere in his already wounded shoulder. By sheer will power, he held himself steadily erect. Slowly, delicately, he squeezed the trigger. The gunman bent forward at his belt, sat backward onto the floor—

"Bill!" Neva Winters' voice broke the sudden silence. "Bill! Are you hurt? Where are you, Bill?"

He spoke, and for one stolen moment out of the midst of a fight that was to go down in history as the "Battle of Bloody Madrone", he found her in his arms, her crisp, brown hair against his chin.

"I—thought—" she sobbed, trembling. He pressed her to him.

"I've loved you always, Neva. You know that."

"Yes, Bill," she sobbed, "but I was too stubborn to—well, I let the fight between the clans get in the way. Oh, Bill!"

Outside, a blast of shots. Another. Nearer.

"They're drifting over on this side," Bill said. "Where's that storekeeper?"

"Tied up behind the front counter."

"Get him loose and stay here! Have you seen Riggs?" He plucked cartridges from his belt and filled his guns.

"No. One of the three men who grabbed me went to tell him."

"Yes," Boone said grimly, "I know."

He plunged toward the front door, his boots beating noisily.

"Bill! Where are you going? Don't—"

He heard no more. He was on the street. Three men rode past at a dead-run. One of them opened fire at him, but fell before a double blast from Boone's guns. Four or five other horsemen plunged past, and Boone recognized the stocky bulk of Lig Starr and Circle B riders in hot pursuit of the first group.

"Blast 'em!" Starr shouted. "Don't let them two get away!"

A fusillade of shots shattered the air in answer to Starr's command, and Boone saw the two riders ahead topple from their horses to the muddy street. He lunged toward the bridge, but had not gone a dozen steps before he brought up short with a feeling that something had gone wrong. He couldn't understand the feeling for several crashing seconds. Then, suddenly, he realized that over the town had settled an utter absence of sound—producing the odd feeling he had had when the old hall clock had run down and abruptly ceased its steady ticking.

Not a single gun spoke any longer; not a single footstep beat here or there; no slamming door or crashing, splintering glass. Even the huddled horses by the bridge had stopped their frantic squealing and stood immobile, listening.

The battle was over.

SLOWLY, Boone turned toward Lig Starr and his riders.

"Lig," he ordered, "throw a guard around the whole town till morning. Don't let anybody through, not even friends. We can't check up until daylight."

"Daylight?" Starr pointed toward East Madrone. "Besides the moon there'll be enough light in three-four minutes to see anybody around here for ten miles!"

Boone whirled about to see more than a dozen East Madrone buildings already in flames. Men ran here

and there, burning papers, weeds, pine splinters, anything they could set fire to, in their hands. One industrious group was even tearing up the plank sidewalk and piling it into the street for a bonfire. Roofs burst into flame. Smoke billowed in great tumbling rolls, visible only for an instant before exploding as fire-streamers. Boone started to run forward, his first impulse to stop the destruction, but checked himself. If ever a town needed cleaning out, East Madrone did. Fire was a great purifier.

Townspeople of Madrone proper began to peer from doors and windows. A few hurried outside. A Boxed W puncher galloped up.

"Anybody seen Riggs?" he asked. "We've got all th' rest corraled down there except him—and th' dead'uns."

"Riggs!" Boone stepped closer. "Hasn't anybody seen him?"

The puncher shook his head. "Must've got away durin' th' fight."

"Hmmm!" Boone thumped his thumbs on his gun-hammers.

"Hell!" Starr spat disgustedly. His face was beet-red with excitement. The glare of the burning town made it redder.

"We'll make another search in the morning," Boone instructed. "Keep this end of town surrounded, too. I'm goin' over to th' doctor's office—" He broke off, glanced up at Starr. "How about our boys?"

"This was one time you were wrong, Boone," Starr grinned. "Don't know how it could happen, but th' fact is there ain't no dead ones, and only three or four scratched. Already sent 'em into doc's place."

"Good!" Boone exclaimed. "Any of Riggs' crew that're in need of the doc's services, send 'em over."

INFINITELY weary, he walked over to the drygoods store, in the doorway of which stood Neva Winters.

"You must get some sleep," he said.

"Bill?"

"Yes, Neva."

"What big fools we've been to allow ourselves to be led around by Ed Riggs!"

"That, Neva, is a thing of the past."

"Yes," she smiled, and climbed the stairs, vast relief showing on her face.

Boone strode to the street in long, swinging steps. Inside him, despite his weariness, something was singing, and it was not merely the end of the Winters-Boone feud that caused it. He was actually whistling softly to himself as he entered the doctor's office.

"I've just finished what you begun, young fellow," the doctor grinned. "What's yours?"

"Here," Boone directed. "Shoulder. All the way through."

"Hmm!" the doctor grinned broadly, and indicated his operating table. "Shoulder. All the way through—twice."

He set to work, and within a few minutes he had sterilized and dressed the wounds.

"Just a minute," he said. "I want to put a bit of tape over that bandage."

He stepped to his cabinet, tore a strip of tape, and started back. He stopped, peered over his glasses.

"Sound asleep," he mumbled. "Oh, well! Sleep is a great restorative."

Softly he tiptoed from the room, not realizing that his patient was to sleep but fitfully. He was not to know that the patient's mind was charged with visions of rushing horsemen, leaping flames, whining bullets; or that the restless sleeper seemed to see a dead man, bearing the face of Ed Riggs, being carried through the cemetery gates, which a frail, grinning old man was trying in vain to close.

Chapter Six

SO STRONG, in fact, were these images in the mind of the restless sleeper that he awoke long before dawn. Stiff, sore, he bathed his face in the doctor's wash basin and went downstairs to the street.

Several lonely-looking horsemen stood guard at strategic points about the town. He found the others asleep in the hay of the livery stable loft. Awakening only those he needed to relieve the guards, he walked down to the bridge over sparkling Madrone creek, and for a long time listened to its gentle gurglings.

No one had seen Riggs. He had neither been killed nor wounded. The men were positive that he could not have escaped, but on the chance that he had, searching parties had scoured the country throughout the night.

"Then," Boone summed up, "he's hiding in Madrone. After sunup we'll search every building."

And they did—with an interest seldom displayed by ordinary, everyday cowhands. They went at the job with such gusto that they took the hay out of the livery stable, tore down woodpiles, overturned outbuildings. They opened each coffin in old Timothy Reegan's dreary establishment, and questioned the old man about his erstwhile backer until he screamed and cursed at them and tried to strike them with his shovel. At last they gave up, and Reegan headed for the cemetery, muttering imprecations upon them.

"Boone," growled Lig Starr bitterly, "I guess he got away."

"Well," admitted the Circle B owner, "he was a smart skunk at that. Anybody who could keep a feud alive like he has—make profit like he has—wouldn't be expected to sit around and get himself shot up." He turned toward the cemetery, but paused long enough to say, "Listen, Lig, I'm going out to the graveyard to see Reegan about burying the boys killed over at the ranch. You'd better get a bunch of fellows together with shovels and send them along. Gabriel would be blowing his horn long before old Reegan ever got all those holes dug." He walked on, calling back, "By the way, when Neva gets up, tell her I'd like to see her before she goes home."

His answer was a very broad grin.

SWINGING on toward the cemetery, he grew vaguely aware for the second time since yesterday of something being wrong. He stopped, glanced about him. Not a single living thing this side of town, except the old man who had gone tottering on toward his ghastly job. Headstones, shrubbery, rain-beaten flowers, mud.

He entered the cemetery gate. The new graves of the cowhands would be over to the right, beyond his father's grave; the other graves for the Riggs' gunmen would be—well, beyond the rear fence at least. He looked over the shrubs in that direction, walked on. Suddenly he stopped as if he had been shot and had not yet had time to fall. Angry voices rose from among the tombstones.

"All right, Riggs," old Reegan was screaming. "It's your only chance, damn you! You can hide in them thick cedars there for a month, unless—" He broke off in a high-pitched cackle. "Unless," he coughed, "I let Bill Boone in on a little secret."

"No, you don't!" Riggs replied. "I'm goin' to blast you to hell right here and stop your infernal babblin'!"

"I thought of that," the old man shrilled. "So I left a note explainin' things—right where to find you—just in case I don't show up."

"That's a lie!" Riggs whipped back.

For several seconds, Boone could hear nothing. He edged closer to see over the top of a small bush. The men were within ten yards of him, standing beside an unfinished grave.

"All right, you worn-out old carrion crow!" Riggs stormed. "You win! Here's th' money!"

Reegan took the money, but instantly stuck his bald head forward like a turtle's coming out of its shell. "I said all of it!" he snapped viciously.

"I paid you for killin' old man Boone and Winters!"

"Yeah, but how about Tex Kreen? You saw me—from where you wuz

(Continued On Page 97)

Call Her Gun-Girl!

by J. J. MATHEWS

Rocking River lived in fear of Kolb Dilgen's brand of law, and Dilgen ruled with an iron hand. But he made a sad mistake when he crossed a wildcat who loved a wanted man!

ROCKING RIVER was astir. Subtle excitement pulsed through the bleached little cowtown as ranch folks, dressed in the best that was theirs, left buckboards and buggies and saddle-horses at the hitchracks and drifted along the sidewalks in little groups.

This was Saturday night—the night when Rocking River folks could get together, dance and sing and maybe forget the grim shadow of Kolb Dilgen's power.

But to Mary Mercer, leading her rented saddle-pony through the alley behind the livery barn, the town's excitement was tame when compared to the high thrill of anticipation which thrummed deliciously along her own nerves.

Blade Carter would be waiting for her now, on that high promontory which overlooked all the Rocking River country. In her mind she formed a picture of him, clear-cut, detailed—a picture of a tall, straight, bronzed man, mouth a little sad, eyes a little somber.

Probably it was because the picture of Blade Carter filled her mind so completely that she did not see "Fancy Sam" Gurnwall come darting out from the inky-dark space between two buildings. Not till the muzzle of Gurnwall's .45, jamming against her side, brought a little gasp of pain to her lips did she see him.

He was not a pretty sight—though he tried to be. Squat, ugly, with a bullet-scar across the right side of his face. Somehow that scar drew his broad features into a perpetual leer—and perhaps because he wanted to overcome his ugliness, Gurnwall was addicted to fancy outfits. Right now he was wearing white goat-wool chaps, a checkered vest, a huge, powder-white sombrero.

"Where you goin', sister?"

"Why I—I'm going out—"

"Wrong, sister!" Gurnwall always tried to imitate the smooth manner of gamblers— "Dilgen wants tuh see yuh—c'mon!"

The squat, waddling gunhawk reached over, yanked Mary Mercer's .38 from the holster which was slung low, tied-down to her man-style levis. That tied-down gun was almost a badge, for Mary Mercer. Strangers smiled when they saw it—but Rocking River folks didn't. Mary, alone in the world since her father was killed in a mine accident, had fought Rocking River to a standstill. She blazed her own trail through the world—and she wasn't afraid of Sam Gurnwall nor anyone else.

For an instant she debated the chances of fighting back, of breaking away from him. But Gurnwall had the drop—and now he had her gun besides.

He chuckled, in that cavernous, humorless way of his; clicked his jaws together with steel-trap finality, prodded her along.

KOLB DILGEN'S office was upstairs over the undertaker's. And Dilgen, somehow, fitted the location he had chosen. A man taller than Blade Carter—but Dilgen was thin as a rail, pale as chalk. There was a queer rigidity about him—he held his narrow shoulders back, kept his head high. Mary Mercer always felt that Dilgen's eyes held cold, mocking contempt as they peered down at the world past his big, beaked nose.

A young man, this one—yet he had never been young. The cruel, driving

urge to grasp and control and govern always had been his one interest—had robbed him of youth.

Now, he was Rocking River's law. Its sheriff—but not its executioner. The blatant, ugly Sam Gurnwall handled that end of things.

Gurnwall pushed Mary Mercer into Dilgen's office, tossed her little .38 onto the desk. "Here's the Mercer wren, Sheriff."

Dilgen sat at his desk, stiffly in his chair, and eyed Mary through the wisp of smoke which ascended from his long cigar. There was all the difference in the world between Dilgen and his hired man—where Gurnwall was leering, blatant, flashily dressed, Dilgen was somber, morose, and dressed in the long coat of a successful cowman. Dilgen had no more flash than a sickly crow—and yet the dullness of his appearance could not hide the razor edge of cruelty that was a part of the man.

"You're not going out of Rocking River tonight, Mary," Dilgen told the girl.

"What makes you think I'm not?" she retorted.

"You're a fool, Mary. If you had a lick of sense you'd know that what I say goes, in this town. You've bucked me for a long time—and you've been sneaking out of town, every chance you've had, to meet that Carter hombre. Well, tonight you're not meeting him—I am. You saw the boys waiting outside. We're going out and teach that tight-mouthed Carter hombre that hornin' in here was the mistake of his life!"

"You can't!" Mary Mercer said furiously. "You can't! Just because Blade dared to move in here, is proving up on land that you considered yours, you hate him! But you'll never get away with—"

"Wrong again," Dilgen said, in his dry voice. "You're a mighty cute little wren, Mary—and I hate to see you make a mistake. So take a look at these—"

Sam Gurnwall's croaking giggle was the only sound in the room as Dilgen shoved a sheaf of reward notices across the desk.

Mary recoiled, stiffened, stared at the dodgers because she couldn't tear her gaze from them. They bore Blade Carter's picture, offered one thousand dollars reward for him, dead or alive! As coldly impersonal as advertisements of the price of beef, those yellowed dodgers were— This thing could not be true!

"But it is," Dilgen said, as if he'd read the girl's thoughts. "The Carter hombre's been mighty stand-offish—I'll lay you odds he's never even told you, on these nights when you've been meeting him, that he's a wanted man, an outlaw— You ought to thank me for this, girl!" Dilgen's dry, rasping voice lingered over those words. "You, little maverick, had better be mighty careful about the company you pick. You're on none too good footing, slinging hash in Wong's—"

"Wong's treated me better than any Rocking River folks ever dared to, with you around!" Mary blazed. "And you'll never find Blade!"

"Yeah?" Dilgen rose to his full, brooding height. "Carter is waiting for you right now, on Silver Butte!"

Mary recoiled, stunned. "Why—How on earth—"

Sam Gurnwall chuckled. "I've been followin' yuh—listenin' tuh yore talks with Carter!"

Quick fury flamed in Mary's cheeks. Choking back an exclamation of rage, she wheeled, took a step toward Fancy Sam. But she couldn't afford to make a fool of herself now—she'd have to wait until she had at least an even chance of getting away....

Dilgen, with a sort of high satisfaction, in his manner, slung a gunbelt about his rail-thin body, tightened the buckle, stalked to a window. "The boys are waiting, down there in the street," he told Gurnwall. "I'll have to go down now. Tie this girl, make damned sure she won't get loose, then lock her in that storeroom. Soon as you're through, come down—we'll be waiting for you."

Dilgen strode to the door, gave Mary a slight, mocking bow as he left the office.

FANCY SAM Gurnwall rubbed the palms of his hands along his goat-fur chaps. "C'm'ere, you!"

Mary Mercer dodged away from the squat gunhawk's clutching arms, darted to the other side of the desk.

"Damn yuh!" Gurnwall panted. "Yuh heard what Dilgen said! Now I'm gonna bat yore sassy face a couple times—"

Something like the fury of a cornered mountain-lioness was in Mary Mercer's manner as she faced him across the desk. She glanced down, saw her .38 lying near a heavy bronze paperweight, on the desk."

"No, yuh don't sister!" Gurnwall rasped, snatching for the gun and stuffing it into his pocket, as he darted around the end of the desk.

Rocking River had called Mary tigress, little maverick, gun-girl—but now there seemed no fight left in her. Meekly she turned, so that her back was to the desk. "All right," she said dully, hanging her head.

"Yeah!" Gurnwall exulted, hauling at the pair of handcuffs which he carried in a back pocket. "Now—"

Mary Mercer's hands, behind her, fumbled for—and found—the bronze paperweight. The thing was cast in

the shape of a horseshoe. And as she got a good grip on it, Gurnwall came closer, chuckling. "Put out yore hand, sister!"

With every ounce of her strength, Mary swung the bronze weight, struck the side of Gurnwall's head with it. Blood spurted from his temple. His head wobbled, and his sombrero went spinning to the floor as he staggered, groaned, and fell heavily at her feet.

Poised, terrified, Mary Mercer could not even breathe. Gurnwall made no move.... Well, Rocking River had called Mary a gun-girl. Maybe they were right! The man she loved was in danger—she'd fight for him. She'd hurry to him now, help him—and find out whether this story which the yellowed reward notices told were true.

She whirled, grabbed the notices, stuffed them into her shirt. Then, steeling herself, she knelt over Gurnwall, retrieved her own gun, slipped it into the holster on her thigh.

Breathing hard, she darted to the window, peered down. The street seemed crammed with mounted men. Dilgen's men! And the outside stairway was the one means of getting out of this office—

Pantherlike, she swung this way and that, looking for an out. And sudden inspiration struck her. She darted back to Gurnwall, took the white goat-fur chaps off his limp body, pulled them on over her faded denim levis. Breathless now, she steeled herself to the job and took the fancy black-and-white checked vest, put it on over her shirt. She tied his white neckerchief around her own neck, then grabbed his white sombrero, put it on, stuffed the rich brown waves of her hair out of sight in the crown.

And a moment later, imitating Gurnwall's waddling swagger as best she could, keeping her head down so that the wide brim of the Stetson would hide her face, she went down the stairs, crossed the sidewalk.

Gurnwall's fleet-limbed pinto was at the hitchrail. Mary, her throat-muscles so taut that they ached, went straight to the horse, untied him, mounted.

Kolb Dilgen had just come out of the saloon across the street. There was a stranger with him—and as the two strode through the dust to their horses, Dilgen spoke up.

"Boys, want to make you acquainted with Lace Tyson. He's riding with us tonight."

There was a general stir of interest as "the boys" looked the stranger over.

He was a man to arouse interest, all right. Mary, glancing furtively under the brim of Gurnwall's sombrero, saw that Tyson was a very small man—and a deadly one. He wore a high celluloid collar, a straight-brimmed black hat, a neat but not flashy oufit. There was an air of grim capability about him, and he moved with silky surety—yet he had the gentle, detached manner of a preacher.

Lace Tyson. A name famous throughout the West. A man known as a gunhawk, a killer—but, somehow, a man beloved by hundreds whom he had helped along his strange trail. A strange man.

Mary Mercer could only sit motionless, watching Dilgen and the stranger approach. To try a getaway, with all these Dilgen men jostling in the street, would be futile. To try to slip quietly away would result in the discovery of "Fancy Sam's" real identity.

"Tyson's siding us, boys," Dilgen said in his icily smug manner. "The Carter hombre is greased hell with guns, accordin' to reports; so aiming to play safe and sure, I sent for Tyson. Fancy Sam, don't you get huffed now—Tyson's only helping us in this matter, not taking your job. We'll ride, boys!"

Dilgen's remark brought a round of chuckles, while Kolb and the gunhawk swung into their saddles. Mary, her heart pounding so hard that she was sure these men would hear it, kept her head low and squirmed, sulkily, in the saddle, as she figured Gurnwall would do under like circumstances.

She was mighty thankful when

Dilgen and Tyson led the bunch out of Rocking River at a headlong gallop.

SHE kept toward the rear, in order to lessen the chances of her deception being discovered. It wasn't easy—this pinto of Gurnwall's was four-legged lightning, and accustomed to leading the bunch.

The range flowed swiftly, under the drumming hoofs. A corduroy bridge flung out a sudden, protesting burst of sound which slammed against dark, silent trees and echoed uneasily after the bunch had passed. In the darkness under those trees, Mary Mercer reined quickly aside; the Dilgen men raced on, through the night.

Mary took the shortcut—the treacherous rimrock trail. She gave the pinto his chance, now—and the horse responded, eagerly. Inexhaustible, surging power seemed to be stored up in that round body of his. The drumming of his hoofs, sometimes striking sparks from the rocks, was like the wild cadence of turbulent, dangerously thrilling, music.

The rimrock trail surged upward, along risky cliffs, into the thin, clean moonlight. Far below, Mary could see the plume of dust kicked up by the thin black string of the Dilgen bunch—they were going miles farther than she, across the sweep of the basin, because they didn't know this shortcut. Only Gurnwall could possibly know of it—

The pinto's breathing was labored, now—and spurts of vapor came from his distended nostrils. But he was game, and his gameness was all that drove him on, toward the end when, slipping and floundering on the pine needles which covered the ground, he climbed Silver Butte.

BLADE CARTER was here, waiting beside his horse in a little open space among the fragrant pines. Sensing Mary's headlong approach, the homesteader whirled, clawed for his guns, crouched. A move crammed with the bitter wariness of a hunted man....

"Blade!" Mary, in the bounding rapture which she felt at the sight of Carter's strong, straight figure, had forgotten that she wore Sam Gurnwall's fancy outfit, that she had ridden Gurnwall's horse. "Blade—don't you know me?"

He relaxed, thumbed back his sombrero while she flung herself from the saddle, darted to him, clung to him.

Still clinging to him, as a drowning person might cling to a rock of refuge, she poured out her story.

"Blade—they're coming!" she finished. "They'll be here—"

Carter held her at arm's length, gently—and in his eyes was the deep, somber understanding of one who has suffered. "Why the Fancy Sam getup?"

"I had to get his outfit, to get away! The street was full of Dilgen men, Blade! I couldn't wait till they left town, because Dilgen always leaves some of his men to guard the street. I had to—"

"Little sweetheart!" Pride was in Carter's voice as he drew her to him. But she tugged away, pulled the reward notices out of her shirt, unfolded them with trembling hands. "Blade—Blade, Dilgen showed me these—"

The homesteader looked at them—and the muscles under his tanned cheeks suddenly knotted, stood rigid. "Yeah," he said, between clenched teeth. "Sort of definite, ain't they? Now you know my secret—an' I reckon you'll be leavin'. Everybody does, soon as they find out."

Mary Mercer's gaze was fastened, unswervingly, to the homesteader's bronzed, strong, yet tolerant face. Pain clutched at her heart, as she released the aching loneliness that was part of his life.

"Ain't kickin'," he said. "There's been—more happiness than I got comin' my way, I reckon, just in knowin' you, hopin' that maybe you loved me like I loved you, hopin' that some day—" Fierceness was in his manner now, and he gripped her arms so tightly that it brought bitter-sweet pain. "I've tried to tell you! But I was scared of losin' you—an' you're so precious—"

"Blade—I'm sticking with you," Mary said softly.

The homesteader stared down at her. "You can't, me—a wanted man! An outlaw!"

"I know you, Blade. Know you couldn't ever have done anything very bad. Blade, I've had to fight the world, every inch of the way. Now I want to keep on fightin'—at your side. Guess I—should have more pride than—throw myself at you this way. But I can't be like some girls, Blade—coy an' clingin' an'—"

"An' crooked!" Carter finished. He touched her cheek with fingers that trembled. "Mary—you're a heap different; but fightin' back ain't always the way. I've tried it—found out that it's a blind trail. I was branded from the start—an' outlaw's whelp. But I figured I could fight the world. Run out of the badlands at fifteen, got me a ridin' job. A bullyin' foreman found out who I was, accused me of some rustlin' that had been done. Like most any kid, I got hot under the collar, called him a liar. He went for iron. I—had to beat his draw. From then on—well, here I am, Mary. I figured maybe to leave the past behind, here in Rockin' River. But now—I got to be driftin' on. Got to leave you, just when I've found you."

The low drumming of hoofs, echoing among the pines and getting louder every minute, reached their ears. Mary stiffened. "Blade—you've got to take me with you!"

His powerful arms pressed her slim body to him. His lips, quivering a little, sought hers—

Gently he freed himself, wheeled to his horse, paused with one foot in the stirrup, looked back into her stricken eyes.

"You, dodgin' the world with me, skulkin' in the hills, huddlin' an' freezin' in the rain, not darin' to build a fire because the lawman might see the light of it? I can't take you with me, on that trail. You—hide somewhere, now. I'll—draw Dilgen an' his bunch away."

Almost savagely, he swung his lithe body into the saddle, spurred his roan, disappeared.

LIKE one stunned by a blow, she stood beside the lathered pinto, until the Dilgen riders came bursting out of the shadows. Some urge for self-preservation stirred her then—but it was too late. Dilgen's men dismounted, seized her, wrenched the .38 from her hands, pinioned her.

And she put up none of the fight that might be expected of her. There was nothing to fight for, now.

Dilgen swung down from his saddle, stalked forward, thrusting his men aside. At Dilgen's heels trotted a squat, ugly man who wore denim pants and a dirty shirt. Fancy Sam!

Dilgen clicked his teeth, struck Mary in the face, so cruelly that pain made a blinding swirl before her eyes.

"Wouldn't do that, Dilgen." It was the low, velvety voice of Lace Tyson. The gunhawk sat loosely in his saddle, smiling in that gentle, detached manner of his.

Yet there was an edge of menace in his voice—something which made the Dilgen bunch break and back away, forming a lane with the gunhawk at one end and Dilgen at the other.

"I am doin' it!" Dilgen yelled—and this was the first time Mary had ever seen the man gripped by fury such as this. Dilgen's thin frame was shaking, his gaunt cheeks were taut, his deep-set eyes blazed. "This damn wren crossed me. I'm handlin' this, Tyson!"

"Handlin' it wrong. You let the Carter hombre get away from you, even though he passed within a few yards of us."

"Carter ain't gettin' away! I'm just smarter'n he is, that's all! He figured to draw us away from the girl—well, it didn't work, did it? Gurnwall, you take this outfit of yours from the girl, put it on and take your horse—ride after Carter. He'll think you're the girl when you catch up with him. And then the rest of the boys, and that means you too, Tyson, cut him down from whatever cover comes handy. Got that? Gurnwall, whom Carter will think is the girl, gets Carter off guard, then the rest of you settle him. Get going!"

They took the goat-fur chaps, the

fancy vest and sombrero, from Mary Mercer. Gurnwall put them on, wiped dried blood from the side of his face with a handful of grass, gave Mary a baleful glance and a muttered curse, then mounted the pinto.

The bunch swung into motion, following Gurnwall. Lace Tyson spurred his horse last of all—and glanced toward Mary as he did so. A strange, unreadable glance, yet subtly comforting.

But then, Tyson was a strange, unreadable man, tinged with something mighty like Blade Carter's sadness. The sadness of men who are set apart from life....

KOLB DILGEN remained with Mary. "All right!" he snapped. "Get on that horse Gurnwall left!"

She faced the boss of Rocking River, weighing her chances of escaping from him. There were none. His .45 was in his hand; and a blaze of cruel purpose was flaring in his eyes.

He was very near to her; suddenly his long arms snaked out, lifted her off the ground, pressed her body tightly to his. His lips sought hers—

There was razor-edged, startling savagery in his kiss. When finally he let her go his eyes blazed with triumph—he mistook her quick, angry breathing, the fury in her eyes, for an answer to his own passion.

And he grabbed her again. "Damn you!" he panted. "I've had my eye on you, for a long time. Carter's out of the way now—you and I are going to that dance tonight, to let Rocking River know that from now on, you're Kolb Dilgen's woman. Savvy that?"

Mary wrenched away from him, dodged, tried to escape. But his long arms pinioned her. Something like madness, some savage pleasure which he found in forcing his will upon others, was driving him on now.

"Get on that horse!" he yelled. "Ride ahead of me—and so help me, if you make a wrong move between here and Rocking River, I'll blow you apart!"

THE MAN and the girl rode into town, halted in the blaze of light flung out by the windows of Harney's hall. A burst of laughter and handclapping and square-dance music came through the doorway, with a waddy who came out onto the porch to build himself a querley.

Dilgen, forcing Mary to walk ahead of him, mounted the steps, thrust the goggling waddy aside.

"Dilgen, you must be loco!" Mary Mercer told the gaunt, saturnine boss of Rocking River. "I'll never—"

"Maybe I am crazy—crazy for you!" In the dim light, as she pressed against the closed door of the hall, Mary could just make out the beating of a pulse on Dilgen's temple. It seemed so strange, that this icy, ruthless master of Rocking River's destiny should be this much affected by anything, even the desire for a woman. "You little maverick!" Dilgen rasped. "I'm giving you the chance of your life! Carter was the last obstacle in my way—now, you little fool, I'm putting you beside me. Get in there!"

The gaiety in the hall was like a blow in the face to Mary. Somewhere, right now Blade Carter might be riding into Dilgen's trap, might be toppling from his saddle....And here in the hall, fiddle and accordion and guitar were playing their loudest and fastest. Boots were scraping, spurs were jingling, skirts were swishing....

"Alamen left, with a gran' right an' left!" the grizzled old caller shrilled, stamping with a game leg and clapping his hands to keep time. "First lady off to the right, an' swing ol'—"

The caller stopped, stared open-mouthed. The music ended on a rasping discord. Set after set of the dancers stopped, faced Dilgen.

No word was spoken—none was needed. It was not Dilgen's way to do his talking with words. He had never come near any of the Rocking River folks' entertainments before—and now, as he piloted Mary across the floor, everybody in the hall knew what this meant.

Kolb Dilgen was placing his brand upon Mary. Letting everybody know that from now on she was his property, as much so as the ranches which he had taken, on "legal" pre-

texts, from these stooped, work-worn elderly folks who tried so hard to forget their troubles by dancing.

He had holstered his .45—but his grip on Mary's arm was cruel, painful. Something like shame welled up within her. She felt so damned alone—and suddenly she was acutely conscious of her faded denim levis, her man-style skirt. Her outfit was mighty near pathetic, against the bright calicos and ginghams of the ranch women.

Dilgen took Mary to the table where coffee and sandwiches were being served. A stooped, kindly old ranch lady poured coffee from a huge and steaming pot. Dilgen took the first cup, downed it almost at a gulp; and then, with a high, fiery triumph in his manner, he picked up a second cup and thrust it toward Mary.

With her hands clenched at her sides, her chin high, she shook her head.

Dilgen smiled to her. But it was a smile that had no warmth, no friendliness, no humor—just a sneaky, insinuating something which seemed to reach out and coil around Mary's body. "Don't be a little fool!" he warned her. "Carter's got his by now. And you should worry, with me to—"

"You're mighty sure!" Mary flung at him.

"Why not? The boys have got a perfect setup—they can't miss. Carter's one of these hombres that doesn't believe in punishing a horse. The boys will catch up with him easy—he'll think Fancy Sam is you, and before he gets close enough to find out, the boys will—"

Driven by a sort of desperation, Mary wheeled, sent an anxious glance through the hall.

THE ROCKING River folks were resuming their dance—but now they had the surly manner of unwilling actors. Furtively, sullenly they were watching Kolb Dilgen. Open sympathy for Mary Mercer was in more than one pair of eyes.

Since Dilgen had told her that he was taking her to the hall, Mary had cherished a vague hope of getting these ranch folks to help. But what could they do? It was Dilgen's law that no man in Rocking River, except himself and his deputies, could carry guns. These cowmen were all unarmed....

Mary flung a glance out through the window of the hall. From here, she had a vista of the deserted cowtown street, and of the mountains towering above. Somewhere under those jagged peaks, Blade Carter might be surrounded by Dilgen's men, might right now be toppling through swirling gunsmoke.

And Mary's one chance to help him lay in rash action. Disregarding Dilgen's low, snarled warning, the sudden grip of his hand upon her arm, she pulled a decisive breath into her lungs.

Dilgen might—probably would—kill her for it, but she'd tell these Rocking River folks a couple of things first—

The rising thunder of many hoofs, coming down the street, halted her. There were quick, sharp commands, outside the door of the hall—the gasping of winded horses—a clop-clop of hoofs as a staggering horse, in spite of the cursing of his rider, lurched onto the sidewalk—the thudding of many boots on the porch.

Fancy Sam Gurnwall, limping, his goat-fur chaps stained by blood and his ugly face twitching with pain and rage and excitement, came lunging into the hall, guns in his hands.

Gurnwall's eyes located Dilgen. Holstering his guns, Fancy Sam rushed toward his boss.

"Dilgen! I spotted yore hawse at the rail, knowed you was in here. That damn' gunnie you brung in—he up an' crossed us! Him an' Carter shot their way out! Rode back this way, towards town!"

"Shut up, you fool—want everybody to hear?" Dilgen hurled the low, rasping words through his slash mouth. "Get out of here, get the boys distributed so—" Dilgen caught his sidekick by the shoulder, started to hustle the limping gunman out of the hall.

Left alone for a moment, Mary Mercer glanced out through the window, toward the cold mountains. She stiffened, clapped the back of her

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Boothill's Rainbow

By MAT RAND

Lora Lee was waiting for the rainbow, following the long-awaited rains. But now, it looked as if only her lover's grave would lie at the foot of that rainbow.

LORA LEE raised her dark head to sniff eagerly at the rain clouds high on Thunder Mountain. The smell of fresh earth and green growing things made her forget her companion for a moment, but Thad Kennerly reminded her of his presence when he began a new argument.

"I hate rain," he growled in his throat. "We've had nothing else for the last month, and we're due to get some more."

"I love the rain." The girl swept a rounded arm to call attention to the new grass. "It means money for the cattlemen, and most of us need plenty to make up for last year's losses."

Her dark eyes softened with a cowboy's own love for his home range while she studied the green Wyoming hills, and the high mesa pastures. Gray wool shirt buttoned to the neck, moulded snugly to the firm young lines of her figure; elkhide chaps over high-cuffed levis—she was cowgirl from black stetson to high-heeled, hand-made boots.

"You needn't worry about money," Kennerly reminded her arrogantly. "I have enough even if the U up and U down never makes a profit."

She turned her eyes from the mountain and watched his ruddy face with a flush of color in her dusky cheeks. Kennerly was dressed like a range hand, but somehow he was different; the girl shook her head without being conscious of her disapproval.

"You don't get the feel of Wyoming like the rest of us who depend on the rain and the grass," she murmured, half to herself. "I guess it's because you were not born and raised in these hills."

Kennerly curled his lips and shrugged wide, powerful shoulders. "Cattle," he grunted, then called attention to the horse under him. "I like horses better, and you haven't told me how you like Gray-boy. He's thoroughbred, just like my own horse."

Lora sighed softly and tightened her hand on the bridle-reins. "That's one of the reasons why I said you don't understand," she explained frankly. "Gray-boy is a beauty, but I like a cow-pony much better. Perhaps because our horses have been raised here in Wyoming hills like the rest of us who work cattle."

"I can ride and rope with the best of them," Kennerly said, his gray eyes sullen. "The U up and U down is the biggest outfit in Big Horn Valley."

Lora Lee did not seem to hear him. Her head was turned toward the creek-bed where every sound painted a picture to one who knew range work. A cowboy was down there tailing up an old cow that had been caught in a bog hole.

"Up yuh!" a deep voice shouted, and loud sucking noises told of the rider's success, she could hear the clatter of hooves when both horse and cow left the mud and clambered out on hard ground.

"That's Cord Grant of the Backward G," the girl chuckled, and Kennerly frowned at the light of interest in her eyes. "Maybe he needs a hand."

She forgot that she was not riding her own trained cow-pony when she urged the gray thoroughbred toward a shelving bank with hand and heel. The animal shot forward like an arrow, and he reared high when the girl attempted to set him up at the edge of the bank.

"Kick loose, feller!"

Lora had the sensation of being high in the air with crumbling earth behind her. She kicked free from the stirrups when the cowboy yelled a warning. Then she threw herself down and to the side when the tall thoroughbred clawed for footing with his hind feet when the soggy bank gave way.

She felt herself dropping through space with arms spread wide like a bird in flight. While the shadow of the plunging horse hovered above her, and the rain-soaked earth thudded down to the creek bed. Then she was caught in a crushing pair of strong arms with the breath grunting from her straining lungs.

She felt herself jerked aside just as the shadow above rushed down upon her, and she gasped when a stirrup struck the left side of her head. A little cry fluttered from her parted lips before her eyes closed when darkness fell.

The tall cowboy fought for a foot-

ing and found one with his high heels hooked on a slab of scab-rock. His arms tightened about the unconscious girl while his head swiveled to watch the struggling horse. Cold blue eyes that softened with pity when the thoroughbred tried to get to its feet and screamed with agony.

"Pore feller," he murmured huskily, and shifted the girl to his left arm.

A gun-shot roared suddenly to echo the slap of his right hand against gun-leather. The suffering thoroughbred sank down and ceased to struggle, and Cord pouched his forty-five when a sharp voice snarled from above.

"You'll pay for that animal, Grant. I'm coming down when I find a safe place!"

Grant caught his breath when he raised his head for a look. Kennerly was taking no chances of a slide, but the Backward G cowboy recognized that arrogant voice. A working hand would have slid the horse down the slant on its tail, but Kennerly was not a working hand.

"Follow the trail," and Grant could not keep the faint sneer from his deep voice. "I'll be waiting right here."

Hoofs pounded away up on the mesa, and Cord became suddenly conscious of the soft warm body in his arms. He lowered his head and caught his breath sharply. Long dark lashes brushing ducky rose-colored cheeks. Even white teeth like pearls between parted red lips. Lora Lee was like a sweet sleeping child, and her dark beauty brought a hungry ache to his arms.

"Rouse up, little feller," he pleaded huskily, and shook her gently. "Yo're safe enough now, Lora girl!"

FORGOTTEN was the mud and the dripping brush while he watched her long lashes for returning conciousness. His blue eyes clouded with worry when he saw the angry bruise on her temple. Instinctively he lowered his head and brushed the bruise with his lips before he realized what he was doing.

"Saying I'm sorry," he murmured, and a flush colored his face when he felt the thud of his heart hammering against his ribs.

He stiffened when the girl sighed tremulously and tightened her arms around his neck. He was almost certain that soft warm lips brushed the hollow of his throat, but the arms tightened when he tried to turn his head to see the girl's face. The threatening storm was forgotten while he stood between the brawling creek and the high shelf, with Lora Lee held tightly in his arms.

His muscles jerked instinctively when a heavy quirt whistled savagely and cut him across the shoulders. He had forgotten Kennerly, and so engrossed was he with his own thoughts that he had failed to hear the big man's horse coming down the winding trail. Again the braided rawhide bit into his flesh, and he turned slowly with cold anger smouldering in his blue eyes.

"Put her down!" Kennerly bellowed, and dismounted from his tall thoroughbred. "The man don't live who can kiss my promised wife without carrying my mark!"

Promised wife? Grant felt his heart miss a beat while the blood turned cold in his veins. He heard a startled gasp, and then Lora Lee scrambled to get her feet on the ground. She was out of his arms whirling toward the big rancher, but the hard metallic voice of the Backward G cowboy rang in her ear and stopped her.

"Climb yore hoss, Kennerly. You and I can settle our differences another time!"

The girl turned slowly and bit her lips when she saw the gun in Grant's hand. His face was a savage mask of anger, and something else. Disappointment perhaps, and the girl found her tongue at last.

"When did I promise to be your wife, Mister Kennerly?" she asked softly, but there was an edge in her throaty voice.

"We have talked about it for months," the big rancher answered sharply. "It was only last week that I told you that I would like to set the

date of our wedding for June!"

"That's yore own personal business," Grant interrupted coldly. "But whipping me with a quirt is something else, Kennerly. I'll meet you right down here tomorrow this time!"

"Ten o'clock," he agreed promptly. "You named it, so I'll call it bare fists."

Cord glanced down at the gun and holstered the weapon. "Gun-shy, eh?" he sneered coldly.

Kennerly shook his head slowly. "It's not that," he growled in his throat. "But nothing else except beating you to a pulp will make me feel right again!"

The tall cowboy nodded his head and waved one hand carelessly. "Ride off feller," he said gruffly. "It's all of six miles to the Double L, and that thoroughbred of yores won't carry double. My hoss will, him just being an ordinary cow-pony. See you at ten tomorrow."

Kennerly glared angrily but was forced to capitulate. A six mile walk for Lora in high-heeled boots was out of the question, but he glared at the dead thoroughbred and spoke through clenched teeth.

"Killing Gray-boy will cost you a thousand dollars, Grant," he almost whispered.

Cord took a step forward and checked himself when the girl laid a hand on his arm. "That gray had a broken back, Kennerly," the cowboy said softly. "Any man that loves a hoss would do the same for him!"

"I broke his back," the girl interrupted with a catch in her husky voice. "I'll pay you for him out of my own money, Mister Kennerly. Now, please go!"

The big man stared at the girl and whirled his horse with spurs biting deep. They watched him gallop up the steep trail and disappear around a bend, and Cord shook himself and reached for his tailing reins. Climbed his saddle and kicked a stirrup loose for the girl without speaking.

LORA LEE caught the back of his broad belt and pulled herself behind the cantle. "I forgot to thank you, Cord," she whispered close to his ear. "Gray-boy yonder. I might have got the same."

He felt the shudder that ran through her body. "F'get it, little feller," he growled softly. "That off stirrup hit you in the head, and for a moment..."

"Would you care, Cord?" she asked eagerly.

"Care?" and then the tall cowboy tightened his muscles and gritted his teeth. "Didn't know you was promised to that U up and U down jigger," he muttered sullenly.

Lora Lee closed her eyes and gigged the horse with her spurs. "Please take me home, Cord," she pleaded wearily. "I have a headache."

The broad back lost its stubborn lines instantly, "I ought to be hoss—hyphen whipped," the cowboy murmured, and half-turned in an attempt to see the bruise.

Lora Lee tightened her arms and hid her face against the back of his shoulder.

Cord Grant stopped his turn with a startled look in his blue eyes. His mind flashed back to the scene in the creek bottom, and then he shook out the leather whangs and began to hum happily. Measuring his words to the beat of the horse's hoofs.

"In the hills of Old Wyomin'..."

The girl listened and widened her brown eyes. Frowned a bit while she tried to find the reason for his sudden change of mood. Then a flush of scarlet swept over her dark face. Cord Grant had kissed her and she wasn't supposed to know.

Her little knuckles dug into the strong flat muscles of his back when she realized how she had betrayed herself. A cowboy learns to read sign early in life, and improves that ability with the passing years. Her cheek still rested against his back, and she could hear his deep voice vibrating in the mighty sound-box of his chest. Humming softly like a big happy boy.

Lora Lee lost her tightness and smiled through misty brown eyes. Like the sun breaking through the the clouds after a mountain storm. The cowboy had stopped singing, and she raised her head when she felt the

muscles move in his right arm.

"Look yonder on Ram Mountain," he said softly. "They don't make 'em any prettier nowhere in the world."

She thrilled at the quality of affection in his tone. Her eyes followed along his arm and over the tips of his brown fingers. And then the world seemed brighter to Lora when she saw the perfect rainbow making a bridge across the valley from the mountains to the creek.

"It's beautiful, Cord," and her voice was muted like a far-away bell.

"It's a real Wyoming rainbow."

"Means good luck for all of us," he murmured softly. "I bet a feller could find a pot of gold at the foot of it like they tell about in the story."

"The foot of the rainbow is down there in Happy Creek," the girl added thoughtfully, and felt the color staining her cheeks when the cowboy jerked under her hands.

"That reminds me," he said grimly, and she knew the spell had been broken when he thought of Kennerly.

"Must you meet him?" she asked with a catch in her voice.

"I'll bet old Link Lee, yore Dad, is glad to see that sunshine," the cowboy evaded carelessly. "Yonder he is tailing a bogged critter up out of a soap-hole."

"Oh," and the girl could not conceal the note of disappointment in her husky voice. "I didn't realize we were so close to the Double L."

"All of two miles, but right now he's riding up to see how come you got yoreself a-foot," and Grant reined to meet the cattleman.

Lincoln Lee was tall, spare, and typically cowboy. His keen brown eyes swept over the mud-spattered pair, and his lips smiled with understanding. In cow-country manner he began to hooraw his blushing daughter.

"Couldn't handle that gray thoroughbred, eh, Lora?" he teased. "And like as not Cord gave you a leg up while big-money Kennery, took out after his blooded hoss."

"A bank caved with me, Dad," the girl explained soberly. "Gray-boy broke his back and Cord shot him."

"Sho now," and sympathy softened the cattleman's weathered face. "He hurt you any?" he asked anxiously.

The girl shook her head and slid to the ground. "Cord caught me when I fell," she explained. "Kick an ox-bow loose, Lincoln Lee!"

The old cattleman freed a stirrup and toed it out to the girl. Then he extended his right hand to Cord Grant with a little grunt of relief.

"Thanks, neighbor," he murmured gruffly. "What become of that big U up and U down feller?"

"His thoroughbred couldn't pack double, so I brought Lora on home," the cowboy answered carelessly but his tanned face twitched when he felt the whip-burn under his heavy wool shirt. "Reckon I'll be getting along to the Backward G."

The old cattleman turned in the saddle and grinned at the girl when Cord Grant scratched with a spur and headed across the valley. Then he rubbed his chin and shook his head.

"Only thing backward about that cowboy and his outfit is the way he makes his brand," he chuckled. "With the G turned wrong-side to."

He jerked when the girl gigged slyly with a spur to send the leggy sorrel rocketing toward the Double L. "I'm wet and hungry," she snapped. "Let's line out for home!"

CORD Grant rode down the winding trail along Happy Creek with an eye on the rim of Ram Mountain. Storm clouds were gathering at the peak, and he could feel rain in the early morning air. His lean hips were free of gun-belt and holster, and his blue eyes expressed surprise when he saw Kennerly waiting on the trail close to the slide where he had killed the injured thoroughbred.

The big man's polished boots were mud-coated, and he was washing his hands in the creek when Grant rounded the bend. The tall cowboy caught his breath when he saw a long mound at the end of the slide. Kennerly had buried Gray-boy under the bank, a task that had required several hours. No one but a lover of

horses would have gone to so much trouble, and the Backward G cowboy felt a new respect for his rival.

"Figgered on doing that myself," he said gruffly, when Kennerly glanced up.

The big man curled his full lips. "I bury my own dead," he clipped shortly. "I raised that gray colt, and he was nothing to you!"

"He was a hoss," Grant corrected softly, and swung down from the brush near the same tall thoroughbred Kennerly had ridden the day before. Then he shucked his spurs and chaps and hung them on the saddlehorn.

Thad Kennerly was waiting when he returned to the clearing between the high bank and the creek. The U up and U down owner was an inch over six feet with close to two hundred pounds of lean bone and muscle. An inch taller than Cord Grant, and twenty pounds heavier. Kennerly was close to thirty, giving the cowboy a five-year advantage in age.

"Sorry about that colt, Kennerly," the Backward G cowboy murmured.

"Forget it," the other barked. "I lost my head the other day about you giving him the mercy shot. I'd have done the same for you!"

"Some sense in a man losing his head over a pet hoss," the tall cowboy answered coldly. "But that ain't what brought us down here. You laid quirt-leather over my shoulders! I'm not forgettin' that!"

The big man had his sleeves rolled up; something a cowboy seldom does. His fists clenched to make mighty muscles writhe in his bulging biceps, and his gray eyes narrowed when he sneered from one corner of his mouth.

"I should have killed you for kissing the girl I intend to marry!"

He was sprawling on his back in the mud before he could set himself for the attack. Cord Grant had leaped forward like a mountain cat on the fight, and he put all the sudden flare of his temper behind the fist that battered the sneering lips against the big man's teeth. Then he stepped back and waited for Kennerly to get to his feet.

"Bridle yore jaw and leave her out of it," he growled deep in his throat.

Kennerly rolled and came up protecting his head. He shifted his boots for balance when the cowboy failed to follow up his advantage. Then he smiled coldly and emphasized his remarks with his left fist in a series of jabbing feints.

"I'm going to pay you off for that, Grant," he warned quietly. "You're not the kind that will go down until you are knocked cold. I'm going to save that pleasure until you can't hold up your hands!"

He stepped forward like a dancer and jabbed with a lightning left that snaked through the cowboy's awkward guard and thudded twice against his stubborn jaw. Grant swung both arms and missed when the big man jabbed him off balance just enough to keep him from getting set. Crossed with a straight right that almost closed the cowboy's right eye, and Kennerly danced away without taking a blow.

Cord tightened his lips and rushed his heavy opponent. Kennerly sidestepped and hammered a one-two to the head when the cowboy tried to check his charge. Then the big man followed up his advantage, shooting punches to the lean tanned face with the deadly accuracy of a sharp-shooter.

Grant gasped when lights exploded across his brain. He felt a numbness creeping across his muscles to rob him of strength. Kennerly did not fight like a cowboy any more than he rode like one. He was a finished boxer, and now he was smiling coldly while he worked Cord Grant into position and placed his blows exactly where he called them.

"I don't like the look in your left eye," he sneered, and a lightning fist jabbed true to the mark. "That classical nose of yours," and he crossed with a right to start a trickle of crimson.

The tall cowboy dug in with his high heels and shook his head like a wet dog. The big man stepped in and hammered with both fists. Blows that thudded against the shoulder muscles and paralyzed them at the nerve centers. Then he stepped back and measured his victim when both

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long arms dropped helplessly.

CORD GRANT rolled instinctively and locked with his powerful legs when Kennerly pitched down on top of him. Like leaves before the wind, the cloudburst dumped down in a steady sheet of icy water that cleared his head and restored the strength to his numbed muscles. His big fists shot out and battered the ruddy face when Kennerly tried to break his knee-lock, and the Backward G cowboy came into his own.

Muscles hardened from years of roping rippled across his wide shoulders under the soggy wool shirt. His fists hammered like oaken mallets, and the blows fell like chips from a hewed log. While the cold rain beat down, and the thunder-heads roared from the top of Ram Mountain with a fury that matched the cold killing rage in his heart.

Kennerly was struggling in an effort to regain his feet. Both eyes were battered and closing fast, and his lips were a pulp of bruised flesh. He felt the strength leave his muscles when a stunning blow caught him on the point of the jaw, but there was no fear in his gray eyes when he saw that big right fist poised for the kill.

"Don't, Cord! Don't do it!"

Grant was grinning like a wolf when he set his muscles for the finish. He checked the blow just before his brain could give the destructive command. Through the bellow of thunder and the crash of lightning, he heard the pleading cry of the one voice that could penetrate the red fog of madness that possessed him. His long legs loosed their grip when his big fist opened, and then he came to his knees and pulled Kennerly erect.

"That makes us even," the big man grunted softly. "You ready?"

The Backward G cowboy spread his arms wide and made a dive for the big man's knees just as a rumbling mutter came from the high bank. The force of his plunge carried both fighters into the brawling creek where they sank beneath the muddy water, and Cord kicked himself free and swam upward with long steady strokes.

He gasped for breath when he came to the surface and saw the crumbling bank still sliding into the water. Tons of mud and tumbling boulders covered the place where he had faced his enemy. Then he turned his head to scan the creek in an effort to locate Kennerly.

He tried to stop his progress when he saw a close-clipped blond head bobbing a few yards away. The U up and U down owner was not swimming, and then the cowboy saw the pale face turned toward the cloud-littered sky. Kennerly was unconcious, and the racing tide was carrying him toward the jagged rocks where Happy Creek broke pace over a waterfall on her way to the lower valley.

The tired cowboy faced around and fought against the pull of the current until Kennerly was near enough for him to reach. He twisted the fingers of his left hand into the shirt collar and angled toward the high creek bank. He had to make shore before they were swept over the Devil's Jump. A fifty-foot fall with house-sized boulders waiting down below.

"I'm coming, Cord. Fight hard, cowboy!"

Cord Grant jerked his head up and found new strength when he saw Lora Lee putting her stocky sorrel down the slippery creek trail. Building a loop with her right hand while she set the coils of her rope in the left to use every inch of the stout maguey. The cowboy tightened his grip and struck out at an angle with a prayer in his heart as the girl whirled for the cast.

He felt a weak struggle against his left hand, and Kennerly opened his eyes just as the girl made her throw. The snaky noose spiraled out and landed true to circle both men, but Cord slipped free and tightened the rope under Kennerly's arms.

Lora took her turns around the saddle-horn and reined her horse for the pull. The animal slipped and floundered on the bank until he brought his burden free of the water and slacked off on the pull. The girl turned the sorrel and stifled a cry when she saw the lone man crawling

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weakly up the grassy bank.

Down below her, swimming against the pull of the rapids, a bobbing figure was making his fight. Lora jabbed with the spurs and almost lost her seat when the startled horse rocketed forward and slid down the trail on his tail. Her hands whipped the soggy coils into shape; fifty yards now to the Devil's Jump, and her right hand built a loop and started the swing.

Cord was losing ground against the pull of the torrent, but fighting doggedly to gain the few feet he needed. It would take every inch of the thirty-five foot rope to reach him, providing the soggy coils ran free without snagging. His arms were leaden, but he set his jaw and threw what he had left into a dozen thrashing strokes.

UP ON THE bank, the sorrel braced with ears pricked forward. The rope hissed in a circle over his head and shot out with the weight of water to give it speed. The finicky calf-sized loop stayed open with the coils paying out to use up every inch of its length. Dropped like a bullet over the outstretched hand of the swimming cowboy, who had just completed a stroke that told of ebbing strength.

The trained roping horse was watching the loop, and he sat down at just the right time to close the noose. Grant had started to turn on his back when he was jerked forward with the muscles of his right shoulder throbbing with pain. Then he was towed through the brush-strewn water like a calf going to the branding fire. He forgot the pain in his muscles when a drowsy moment of lassitude robbed him of feeling.

Lora Lee was holding one turn on the slippery saddle-horn while she sent the sorrel up the steep bank. The rope was cutting her fingers against the pull, but she set her teeth. She could scarcely see the cowboy dragging at the end of the rope while she turned to watch over her shoulder. Tears rushed to her eyes and blinded her until the sorrel stopped and eased back to slack off the rope. Then she was out of the saddle, racing and sliding through the mud.

Grant was lying on his back with the loop cutting into his right wrist. The girl threw off the rope. "Cord," she sobbed. "I nearly lost you. I pitched my rope for you, but you put it on...him!"

Then she lowered her head and kissed the parted lips fiercely. A flush of color stained her dusky cheeks when she felt the kisses returned. She tried to pull away, but strong arms tightened about her and held her motionless. Then a soft chuckle started close to her ear and vibrated deep in the cowboy's chest.

"That makes us even," he whispered. "You want to finish this little augerment?" Cord was climbing to his feet, taking her right along with him.

"You cheated, Cordell Grant," she accused softly.

"Smile some and let the sunshine break through. Lora girl! Remember what you told me yesterday?"

"Please, cowboy—what did I tell you?"

"That you weren't promised to Kennerly. You said we would find the pot of gold at the foot of the rainbow right here in the creek bottom. Well—look yonder!"

Lora Lee leaned close to him. The rain had stopped, and now the sun shone brightly through the mist, making a bridge of color from the tip of Ram Mountain, across the valley into Happy Creek."

"It is," she breathed joyously. "It's a Wyoming rainbow!"

THE END

Clothes Make the Cowhand

by ZACHARY STRONG

Fresh from the East, Carla Denton had very definite ideas as to how a ranch should be run!

WHEN THE buckboard skidded to a stop before the corrals of the Slash D, Carla Denton, shivering in the winter wind, inspected her cowhands for the first time. They were a disreputable lot.

No wonder the Slash D hadn't

produced any profits in two years. No wonder her father, Noah Denton, had wished the ranch onto her!

Any cattle buyer could bargain these cowpokes out of every cent of profit. A flush glowed dull-red on her cheeks and a blue-flame glint crept into her eyes. She was angry.

A tall, solid-chested cowhand rocked his shoulders loose from the corral rails and sauntered across to her. Because of his poky gait, her cheeks grew redder.

"Miss Denton?" he queried, peeling his battered hat from his head. "I'm Dan Breslin." Could grey eyes laugh? Or—grin?

"So," she replied, injecting the exact amount of aloofness—aloofness she had practiced en route from the East, "so you're the Slash D manager?"

"Yes'm," Breslin drawled, replacing his hat, the brim of which flopped down over both ears. "I'll show you the house."

The slovenly buckboard driver tossed her bags to Breslin, who set them down without removing his gaze from her face. Some of the bags toppled over on their sides; others grounded bottom-side up.

"I'd prefer," she sliced, "that you use a little care with those bags!"

Breslin looked leisurely down, then back to her face. He caught another bag from the driver. At his finger-hook signal, the ragged line of cowpokes trooped forward and hoisted her luggage to their shoulders. Another signal—a rolled wrist and an indicating thumb—the troop shuffled off to the big pole ranch house.

"Help you down, Miss—er?"

"No," she declined, icily.

SHE stepped from the top of the wheel to the hub, but—missed. And shrieked as she fell outward.

For several seconds she clung to his neck, his strong arms around her—before she became conscious that her feet dangled and that he was making absolutely no effort to set her down.

"Turn me loose!" she flared.

"Sure, ma'm! I was just . . ."

"Of course!"

She marched toward the house.

As she bounced along, she felt as unkempt as these ranch hands. A wisp of her raven-black hair whipped across her eyes; she slapped it back angrily. These loafers did not fulfill her conception of cowboys. They appeared to have worn their clothes since they first reached manhood; the garments fitted like that, they were that worn.

Dan Breslin strode past her and hovered at the door, a hatbox under each arm, until she arrived. A morsel of comic opera flashed across her mind:

A wandering minstrel I,
A thing of shreds and patches,
Of Ballads, songs, and snatches,
And. . . .

No, not patches! This man didn't have enough industry to sew on a patch. Shreds? He was nearly all shreds. A hole in the crown of his hat, three in his shirt—and one of his sleeves half gone. His chaps were tatters.

A cherry fire crackled in the great fireplace. One glance—extreme cleanliness.

"This is Ness Pa," Breslin introduced a lean French-Canadian. "Cook. Housekeeper. Washer woman, maid and—"

"Thank you!" said Carla frigidly.

She was observing with a shudder that Ness Pa's suspenders were too long, that his pants billowed over his boot tops like bloomers, that the boots themselves were tired at the heels. Ness Pa smiled, but wore no shirt; only an open-faced undershirt covered his hairy torso. She was to find later that the huge butcher knife in his belt was used not only as a cooking utensil but as a weapon to discourage cowboy jibes.

She dismissed them, then, and sat before the fire until supper. She thought of the well-dressed Luft

Lagler whom she had seen perform at the Denton City rodeo last evening. Afterwards—dancing with him—maybe Luft could be persuaded to help her get things started on this rundown piece of Oregon?

Luft had executive bearing. He would know how to handle shrewd cattle buyers. He surely must be a good bargainer—else how could he earn the money that enabled him to travel the pace of the West's best society? She could still hear the roar of the crowd as he rode Black Bomber.

How could her father pay so little attention to this old ranch of Grandfather's! True, her father had left when a boy, had other interests now, but—she smiled at their little battle.

Noah Denton had remarked that she was a cute hot-house plant and—she stormed that she could prove she was as good a business woman as he was a businessman. Just give her one of his old chestnuts, some real hard nut to crack, one of his failures—any one of his white elephants!

He did. He suggested that she begin with the Slash D—it hadn't shown a profit in two years.

"And no wonder!" she whipped out aloud, and glared into the leaping fire.

If the cattle were cared for like these men cared for their clothes, their persons—no individual could slop around in neglected clothes without breeding that same careless mental attitude toward the livestock, fences, buildings, even toward his employer, toward selling. If a man were too lazy to sew a patch on his shirt, he'd be too lazy to keep mentally alert while driving bargains with sharp-minded cattle buyers.

She made a decision. And went to supper.

WITH NESS PA driving her buckboard, she preceded the entire Slash D crew into Denton City the next morning.

She observed that not a man had been inside a barbershop for weeks; that is, none save Dan Breslin. His sandy, bushy hair had been recently cut, and he had shaved at least as late as yesterday morning. She rather regretted finding this much satisfactory; it spoiled a perfect negative score.

She herded them into the general store and paralyzed the owner with, "New outfits. Complete. All of them!"

And strode toward the door.

"But, ma'm!" Breslin protested, paused, swallowed. "We don't need any new duds! Why, we—these pants—they're good for—"

"Mop rags!"

Ness Pa smiled and twirled each point of his thin moustache between a thumb and forefinger. A puncher edged toward him, but Ness Pa put a hand on the butcher knife in his belt. The puncher halted, and Carla turned to go.

Ness Pa followed, but she said, "You, too!" And to the storekeeper, "Something that fits him and doesn't flutter all over the landscape!"

Going directly to a barbershop then, she made certain specific arrangements designed to improve the appearance of the Slash D. This done, she went to the hotel to talk with Luft Lagler, but finding that he was out of town, left a message. Returning to the buckboard, she waited a long time for her cowhands.

So long that finally she swung into the store to find the cause of the delay. There, she found only the storekeeper—absorbed in amassing figures on the charge side of the Slash D account. She inquired concerning her riders.

"Gone," the storekeeper mumbled, and went on adding a column of figures.

She stamped her foot, "I said where!"

The storekeeper glanced over his spectacles, nodded toward a rear door. Carla swung along that way and peered outside. And was just in time to see the Slash D outfit, Dan Breslin in front, riding like grass fire over the crown of the nearest hill.

"Why did they leave by the back way?" she inquired.

"Huh?" the storekeeper grunted absently, jotting down a figure. "Oh! Dan said they didn't have the —er—intestinal fortitude to ride down the Main Street with every man of them shining like a new dollar. Said it'd look like the Slash D had gone plumb sissy."

She almost gasped—they'd certainly look queer—new clothes, uncut hair, stubbled faces. Bah!

Ness Pa stuck his long neck around a rack of calico, looking furtively up and down the aisle.

"Let's go, mam'sell!" he pleaded. "If you please, queek!"

Carla stared. The storekeeper had carried out her order with a vengeance. Fit was the right word! Ness Pa's trousers hugged his beanpole form like a rubber glove. Fancy half-boots reached only a tenth of the way up his long, slender shanks. Over a pink shirt, he wore a yellow-and-green plaid jacket, whose tail vainly reached for his belt.

Several children giggled as Ness Pa dashed across the sidewalk and leaped into the buckboard. A fuzzy little dog yelped with delight.

"Please, mam'selle!"

Smiling, Carla climbed into the buckboard, and Ness Pa whipped the span of mustangs into a long lope down the mud-rutted street.

But, the town behind, the smile faded from Carla's lips. If she didn't make good on the Slash D, her father—oh yeah! She would make good!

Inquiry the day before had revealed that Slash D cows had been sold for two cents a pound less than what cows from surrounding ranches had brought. One cattle buyer had told her that the Slash D stuff was not worth a penny more than had been paid for it. He had mentioned something also about a few dozen Number One steers not being able to average up several hundred Number Two cows. She must discuss that with Luft.

SHE DID. For Luft called late that evening.

"You wanted to see me?" He drew a chair close to her, sat down. But he could give no reason for the heavy discount on Slash D beef.

While they talked, Carla observed the care that Luft took with his person. He was clean-shaven, and his clothes, from expensive boots to huge white hat, were in immaculate condition. The blue silk shirt was a bit unsubstantial in comparison with the Slash D, but far better that than a faded green plaid with sundry holes and a ragged, dangling sleeve like Dan Breslin's shirt.

"Luft," she informed him, "I'm trying a pet theory. The Slash D has made no profit in two years. I think I've found what's wrong."

He nodded, bent a little closer.

"In the army," she continued, "soldiers never do their best if they're allowed to go unshaven, dirty —clothes shabby, and the like. They let down mentally and physically."

Luft toyed with a finger that she had hooked over the side of her easy-chair. Surprised, she withdrew her hand.

"Go on," he urged.

"What do you think?"

"Naturally," he replied, "I think you're right."

"But," she went on, "I'm afraid my men won't—well, quite understand without an example. That's where you could help, if you would. You're careful with your dress, always look—"

"Thanks. You know, I'm going to like you a lot—Carla!"

She didn't exactly appreciate the tone of the "Carla," but she resumed, "Would you—well, be my assistant, set an example for the others. I'd pay you well."

"Anything to please a lovely lady!" he agreed.

From that moment, although she tried again and again to discuss ranch affairs, Luft always gaily changed the subject. When she protested, he began talking about her—her raven hair, blue eyes, the flush on her cheeks. He grasped her hand,

but she withdrew it quickly.

"Please!"

"Now," he persisted, "don't be like that! I'm terribly fond of you—don't you like me—just a little bit!"

Suddenly he put his arms around her, pulled her to him. She fought free, twisted to her feet. He followed, gripped her arms.

"Please!" she begged. "You're forgetting yourself! You're spoiling everything!"

He chuckled throatily, bent forward and kissed her—not on the lips but on the cheek, for she rolled her head violently aside. He muttered unintelligibly, tried to kiss her again, but a hard-muscled arm came between them, an arm sunburned to a coppery brown through the hole in a torn sleeve. The strong fingers gripped around Luft's jaw and yanked him backward. Luft staggered, brought up against the wall. He lunged. Dan Breslin dropped him with a single blow on his chin.

While Carla stared at the man, Breslin said, "I'm staying in the spare room at the head of the stairs. Better let him have the one farther down the hall."

"Why, you!" she blazed. "You're —you're—"

"Fired!" he finished for her. "Ordinarily I prefer to stay in the bunkhouse with the boys, but I think it's advisable I move in here."

While she stood too angry to speak, he stepped close to her and with a quick motion pinioned her in his arms. He pressed her so hard against his powerful chest that she could move her head only the merest fraction of an inch. Quite deliberately then, he kissed her, once on the chin, once on the lips, once on the forehead, and—come back to her lips and lingered there.

He loosened her then and stalked slowly upstairs—as if he were weary of a hard job well done. Carla wanted to scream, but managed only an angry gasp. She stamped her foot, gripped her fists, but still no sound came from her widely parted lips.

Luft staggered up from the floor, leaned groggily against the mantel. He apologized: "I'm sorry."

"We'd all better go to bed," she replied, and ran upstairs to her room.

BREAKFAST FINISHED, she found Luft waiting on the front porch.

"Good morning!" he greeted.

She nodded coldly.

"You're very lovely, but I won't forget again."

Contrite? She wondered.

And said: "I'd like a thorough inspection of every phase of the ranch."

Bending against a wind slashed with snowflakes, she hurried directly to the bunkhouse, but got no answer to her knock.

Dan Breslin approached from the barn. "Nobody home. Sent all of 'em into the hills to spot steers. This air's blizzard fresh. May have to haze the stock in."

He eyed her speculatively, for her attention was riveted upon his torn shirt, his floppy hat—a tuft of sandy hair stuck through the hole in it and slanted askew before the wind.

"I thought," she began, "that I told you—"

He caressed his three-day old beard. "Well, you see," he grinned, "I've got a theory—a pet theory—about duds, so I took off that Sunday-go-to-meetin' rig and—"

"Saddle my horse!"

"Sure, ma'm — and — about last night—I'm sort of sorry and—"

"So's everybody else!" she snapped "My horse, please!"

He strode straight forward to a hitchrack behind her and untied one of two horses already hitched there. She flushed; she couldn't honestly say that she had seen those animals until this moment, and she was nettled at his broad grin. Using her best Eastern riding academy swing, she glided into the saddle, and beamed triumphantly at the widening of his eyes.

He mounted the other horse and together they rode into the teeth of the wind until they reached the first brush-covered hills. Rounding the

shoulder of a ridge, they looked down into a canyon where a cowpuncher chased a calf through the brush. As she watched, she felt a certain pride of accomplishment; that fellow surely looked better in his new outfit.

The calf ran into a thicket of buckbush and, head down, stood bawling at the cowboy from the safety of this retreat. The Slash D cowpoke rode carefully around the bushes two and a half times, seeking a best point of entry.

That, Carla reflected, looked somewhat silly. She had always thought of cowboys as daredevils to whom a few bushes would be mere—well, were nothing. She grew conscious that she was scowling, but her jaws didn't really set until the puncher started to plead with the refractory cow-infant, calling "Nice-caffy, nice caffy!" The fellow made a half-hearted attempt to shoo the calf out of his covert by lashing the bushes with a rope.

Several minutes of this. Once the cowboy's impatient horse crashed into the bushes, but the cowboy jerked him back. The fellow brushed his chaps free of broken brambles, and after that took extreme care not to get too close again. Carla twisted her head around to find Dan Breslin grinning at her. He cupped his right palm over his lips and rubbed his stubbled face.

She nudged her horse, and they jogged on over into the next canyon. There, they halted to observe another Slash D man trying to free a steer bogged down in a spring. After several vain attempts to pull the animal out by his rope looped around its horns, he dismounted and studied the situation, his knuckles resting upon his hips. Carla got the idea that he needn't be wasting so much time. It occurred to her that if he'd only step up behind that brute and plant a lusty kick he would generate some energy. She wanted to ask Dan Breslin about this, but set her lips.

To her astonishment, the puncher walked around behind the spring and gathered up an armload of brush, which he dumped upon the mud. Three such trips—until he had built a runway to the steer's rump. This done, he called to his horse, and as the animal heaved back to pull the rope taut with the saddle horn, the cowboy folded the steer's tail into a sizeable kink between his hands. The steer bawled, lunged; the horse backed skillfully away. The steer humped out of the mud.

"Why," blazed Carla, "did he have to build a bridge just to twist that beast's tail!"

Her only answer was two smiling gray eyes. And Dan Breslin's infernal rubbing of his palms over his mouth and bristly chin. He spoke to his horse, and they rode on up the ridge.

A small herd of bawling cattle trailed down out of the high hills ahead of two Slash D men who sat their saddles as if they were riding their first pony. She could have sworn that each had set his hat at the same exact, rakish angle. There was one redeeming feature, however; both were freshly shaven, and their new clothes made them appear like men who could look the world in the eye and—one of them brushed a snowflake from his shirt.

Again she found Dan Breslin covertly observing her.

"What," she ground out, "do you find so diverting?"

He studied the northern horizon, glanced at the drab sky.

"Afraid we're in for a blizzard," he observed, and rode on.

She followed, her cheeks ablaze.

Throughout a morning of rough-trail riding every Slash D cowpoke they met seemed to be given to extreme cautiousness. Instead of the galloping, plunging, yipping cowboys she had expected to find, she found precise dandies who acted as if they were highly-starched little girls at their first party.

She was not only puzzled; she was utterly disgusted. When she got home she hurried into the living room—and there found Luft Lagler

SHE HAD A sudden notion to discharge the whole pack, but curbed the thought. Cowhands, these days, were hard to get—since most of them had deserted the ranches to perform at rodeos and sing sad songs over the radio.

Lagler said: "Large herd of Number One cows cooped up in Grass Mesa feeding corral. Holding them off the market ruined your average. Looks like the Slash D's due to feed up a lot of money this winter."

Carla stiffened. "Any explanation?"

"Not unless Breslin has his own reasons."

"What do you mean?" she asked sharply.

"Let it ride!" He moved toward the door. "Want to see for yourself?"

She did, and accompanied him to Grass Mesa. Luft was right. Even a novice could see that the cows were in prime condition.

As they rode slowly home, she pondered the matter. Maybe Breslin wasn't all he should be—she didn't like to think so, even though he had—kissed her.

The wind had now risen to howling speed. Low, slate-colored clouds raced southward. Snowflakes splattered against their faces, shut the horizon down to a hundred yards.

Looming suddenly from the direction of the home buildings, Don Breslin and several Slash D riders thundered out of the storm. As they shot across a few yards in front of her, Carla saw that they had discarded their new clothes.

Worn shirts, chaps; flapping hats They rode with easy, swaying rhythm. The seriousness of their faces, however, wiped out her anger. There wasn't the least semblance to their indolent, precise actions of the morning.

"Blizzard!" Breslin shouted. "Need both of you!"

"Just like that!" Luft snarled.

He turned his horse in the other direction.

"Where are you going?" she asked

"Home."

"But he said he needed us?"

"Pipe dreams! Let him haze 'em down himself—you're paying him to do it. Anyway—maybe he doesn't want anybody around—when he's handling other people's cattle."

She studied him several seconds the dying beat of hoofs strong in her ears. And, she thought, she was paying Luft Lagler to set an example. Without a word, she wheeled her horse and galloped after the vanishing riders.

Gradually she overhauled the rear horseman. He turned his head just enough to grin at her. She spoke to her mount, drew on up the line alongside Breslin.

"Still a few more to get out of those hills!" he shouted above the pound of hoofs. He glanced about, and she saw that he noted Luft Lagler's absense. He smiled at her then from beneath two snow-blobbed eyebrows, his face far down in the collar of his slicker, rode steadily on.

She had a fierce desire to slap him—no particular reason—just pop him a good one with the full swing of her right hand!

They galloped over a ridge, halted at the first canyon.

"North, you three fellows!" Breslin ordered. "South, you two. All the rest—with me! And keep an eye on Miss Denton—liable to get lost in this storm!"

He plunged up the hillside.

"Lost!" she hissed.

Angrily she tried to keep her mount from following, but the brute crashed through the brush out of control. A steer jumped from cover and her range-bred horse gave chase. The steer changed ends—and so did the horse. Carla—she picked herself out of a snowdrift, muttering. The horse vanished, driving the steer down grade.

"Are you all right?" Breslin shouted, galloping up.

He dismounted. She slapped his face.

Grinning, he swept her into his arms and tossed her behind his saddle. Before she could scramble

down, he had climbed into the saddle in front of her and raked his horse with a spur.

To keep from bouncing off, she clung desperately to his shirt with both hands. The ancient garment began to rip—she skidded farther and farther toward the horse's rump, bouncing high. She had two handsful of shirt and was getting more with every lunge of the horse, but she didn't dare let go.

"Put your arms around my waist!"

SHE DIDN'T hesitate to comply, for now they were rattling along the brim of a precipice and she shut her eyes at the fearful depths below. A stone turned under the horse's feet. He floundered, stumbled.

"Steady, boy!" Breslin soothed.

They drew away from the canyon and Carla breathed again.

Breslin knew just where to search for strays. Invariably he jumped them from some other direction than she thought. When he had gathered a dozen or more together he headed them down the mountain.

"There's your horse!" he pointed. "Think you can stick?"

"Of course!"

She had her doubts, but she'd die before she'd let this grinning cowpoke know how her knees shook. She piled off—without his help.

Mounted again, she rode a little imperiously abreast of him.

Twenty times she beat those steep hills with him for cattle. She marveled at the skill of her horse; she had but to give a loose rein, grip his sides with her legs, and he did the rest. No steer or cow or calf escaped him.

Dan Breslin rode untiringly. Whenever he plunged close, she shut all expression from her face or looked the other way. She had no craving for the high amusement that danced in those gray eyes. His grin was as annoying as was Luft Lagler's desertion.

The blizzard grew worse. Snow drifted high. Darkness dropped with stunning suddenness. But the weary riders kept on.

Three times Breslin rode near and suggested that she go home. Three times she blazed for him to attend to his own business, though home she would like to go. She could scarcely sit in the saddle, and finally, when her horse nipped the course of a flying steer, she had to hang onto the horn with both hands. She gradually came to know that she could stand no more; the spirit was willing, but the flesh was weak.

How long she stood it, she never knew. The bawl of cattle, the shout of riders, the thud of hoofs, all had long ago mingled into one conglomeration of indistinct sound when Dan Breslin caught her reins.

"You don't have to prove a thing to us," he said kindly. "There isn't a rider here who wouldn't work his head off for you."

"But—the cattle?" she chattered through clicking teeth, and wondered why she couldn't move her hands that lay upon the saddle horn.

"We've got them all out of the hills," he answered. "The boys can handle them the rest of the way, but it'll be slow. I'm taking you home."

"I guess I—can—c-can do my share—"

The world began to spin. Her hands refused to hold onto the saddle horn. She knew that she was skidding toward the ground but she could do nothing about it.

"Steady, now!" Breslin warned, and caught her. For a bare instant, he hesitated, then lifted her sidewise into his saddle.

She protested weakly. Then wearily let her head rest against his chest, and Breslin wrapped his slicker around her. One of the other riders rode up and took her horse, and that was about all she knew until Breslin carried her into the living room of the Slash D and lowered her into an easy chair.

The fog soon left her eyes and she stared where Breslin stared. Stretched out on a rug before the fireplace, sound asleep—she ground her teeth—lay Luft Lagler.

Carla rose, glanced at Breslin

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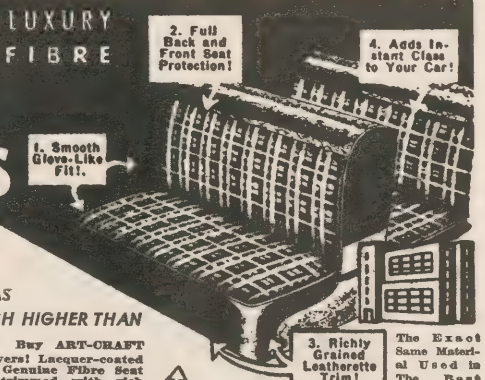
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(Continued From Page 86)

whose chin popped up, his eyes opening wide. The eyes began to twinkle and a grin spread over his face.

"Would you," she requested grimly, "mind looking the other way?" She stepped toward the fireplace.

As Luft Lagler scrambled to his feet, he got a second urge. Half way to the door, a third. He tried to speak, had no chance. With the fourth urge, he lost his hat.

But then, he lunged through the doorway, asking no questions. Carla flung his hat after him. Quite ceremoniously, Dan Breslin closed the door.

Ness Pa entered, garbed in his atrociously loose pants and decrepit boots. Shaking his butcher knife, he announced: "Dinner is served!"

THE SCOWL faded from her face and a little smile raced across her lips. Ness Pa vanished and she turned to Breslin. Only to get a shock—a pleasant shock. For the first time, she became aware that he was carefully shaven. Studying his face, she decided that she liked it—tremendously. She would, however, like to try a comb on that unruly hair.

Her gaze traveled the length of his muscular body, and a snatch of a song ran through her mind:

A wandering minstrel, I,
A thing of shreds of patches,
Of ballads, songs, and snatches,
And...

She couldn't stop her grim smile, and the remainder of the lyric raced through her thoughts:

And dreamy lullabies.

A flush began to glow on her cheeks. She turned again to the fire, very thoughtful.

"Why," she asked at length, "would men act so disgustingly inefficient this morning and turn right around and—well, work like demons beating the storm this afternoon?"

His smile broadened into a grin. Leaning against the mantel, he replied, "Nobody can work when he's afraid of hurting his Sunday-go-to-meetin' duds."

"Oh!"

"You see," he continued, "it's so sunset red. Her eyes finally focused seldom a cowpoke gets a whole brand-new outfit at one time that he's just paralyzed being careful with it."

(Continued On Page 89)

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RAMROD PETE

(Continued From Page 88)

"So you put them back into their old outfits?"

He nodded. "When I knew for certain we were in for a blizzard."

"I was awfully full of theory!" She smiled, and the red flicker of the embers lighted her flushed face to a bright crimson. "Started changing things right off—just like that!"

Breslin kicked a long-end into the fire, and a wraith of blue flame trailed up the chimney. He toed a glowing coal back into the ashes. "I'd like something terrible to get along with you," he mumbled, "but I—that kiss—guess that finished me with you."

Both turned from peering into the fire to peer into each other's eyes.

"I—didn't—didn't mind!" she tossed out desperately, and wondered what had happened to her. She actually wanted this man to—no, she didn't!—oh, yes, she did! Wouldn't he ever! Couldn't he see that she was just dying to have—him—she looked deep into those smiling gray eyes and saw something that made her very, very happy.

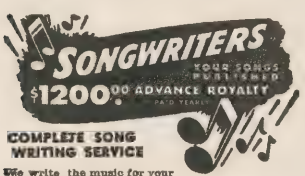
Somehow the distance between them had closed. He was holding her in his arms.

Tilting up her head, he kissed her once on the chin, once on the lips, once on the forehead and—came back to her lips and lingered there.

They sat down before the fire. After a long time, she asked: "Tell me, why didn't you sell those Number One cows so they'd average up the price of the steers?"

HE PUSHED his lips close to her nearest pink ear: "Listen," he whispered, "there's going to be real profit on the Slash D some of these days. You see, sweetheart, all those nice cows are going to have calves in the spring."

She ducked her brow on his shoulder, and knew that her ears were upon a badly torn sleeve of his old faded shirt. She stammered: "I—I must sew a patch on that for you!"



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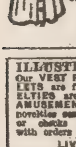

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CALL HER GUNGIRL

(Continued From Page 69)

hand to her lips.

But before she could make another move, Dilgen remembered that he had left her. Tall and saturnine, he wheeled. "Come here, Mary!"

"Sure!" she retorted. With that impudent bounding energy which had enabled her to hold to her maverick trail in Rocking River, she grabbed the huge, steaming coffee-pot from the table, lunged straight toward Dilgen and Gurnwall.

"You little fool!" Dilgen yelled, suddenly clawing for his guns. "What in hell do you think—"

Gurnwall, too, went for iron. But Mary swung the coffee-pot, slung a stream of scalding liquid against Dilgen and the gunman. Both men let loose yells of agony. Their scalded hands involuntarily slacked, dropped the heavy guns.

Mary dived wildly for the guns. Her yell mingled with the clatter of the falling coffee-pot. "Rockin' River! Nail 'em to the wall!"

Dilgen and Gurnwall, realizing now what was happening, dropped to their knees, grabbed for their guns. But Mary Mercer was like a determined little cyclone. She kicked Kolb Dilgen's guns out of reach, got hold of one of Gurnwall's .45's. Gurnwall, cursed, grappled with her, twisted her arm until a cruel stab of pain racked her.

Mary's action was the trigger which released the smoldering hatreds of the ranchers. Their full-throated roar swelled suddenly; and there was sinister purpose in their quick, savage closing-in upon Dilgen and Gurnwall.

Dilgen, brushing his hair back from his chalky face, wheeled and lunged for the door. Grim-faced ranchers blocked his path, hurled him back.

"You fools outside—get in here, help us!" Dilgen screamed.

His gunmen obeyed—came rushing, a cold-eyed horde, through the doorway. And the Rocking River men, their bare fists useless against the guns of these killer "deputies," fell back.

(Continued On Page 91)

(Continued From Page 90)

Beads of sweat, glistening under the swinging lamps, made a strange contrast with the chalky, lifeless color of Dilgen's face as he came lunging through the crowd, confronted Mary. She was pinioned by Sam Gurnwall—she had kept him from using his gun on the ranch folks, but he retaliated by holding her helpless, his foul, alcohol-laden breath gushing into her face as he cursed her.

"You little—" Dilgen began, grabbing her arm.

That remark never was finished. A window, on one side of the hall, broke with a crash and a tinkle of falling fragments. The Dilgen men wheeled to face the sound—and faced the muzzle of a Winchester held in the hands of Lace Tyson, who leaned through the window.

"Gun him down!" Dilgen yelled.

The deputies swayed, unable to make up their minds to throw down on Tyson. There was a detached air of capability about the gunhawk, a calmness which somehow was sinister.

And the abrupt crash of another window, on the other side of the hall and behind the Dilgen men, settled matters. Blade Carter, with a pair of .45's in his hands, slipped through the window, into the hall.

"Now if you Rockin' River gents will sort of circulate around, relieve these fretful Dilgen hands of their hardware—" Blade suggested.

DAWN flung a rosy, kindly glow over Rocking River. Through the cowtown pulsed a new life, a healthy life—the exuberance of a town which had thrown off the throttling loop of a trigger tyrant.

Mary Mercer walked down the street, with Blade stalking easily at her side. "I reckon Rockin' River'll get itself a straight-lawman, now. Dilgen's jail is full plumb to the rafters—with his own men! When Tyson told me that Dilgen had caught you, was takin' you back to town, I—well, I jus' had tuh come back! When we hit town, a waddy come runnin' to us—he said he'd seen Dilgen take yuh into the hall. So we headed there

(Continued On Page 92)

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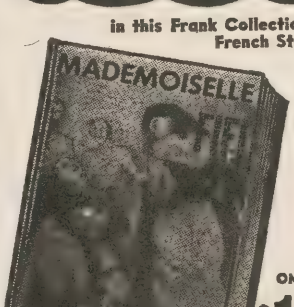

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(Continued From Page 91)

pronto. But we'd never of been able to handle that gang of deputies, in the open. If that ruckus hadn't started in the hall, drawin' all Dilgen's gunslingers in there so we c'd bottle 'em up neat— How'd that ruckus start, anyhow? I thought Dilgen had all them Rockin' River folks so buffaloed they didn't dare even tuh pack guns!"

"I started it," Mary said, not even trying to keep the ecstatic pulse of happiness out of her voice as she clung to Blade's arm. "I threw hot coffee on Dilgen and Gurnwall. I'd seen you'n' Tyson coming, through a window. So I—took a gamble, hopin' to draw Dilgen's gang into the hall."

Something tugged at Blade Carter's mouth. But before he could speak, Lace Tyson rode up. "Figured to say goodby, folks—I'm ridin' on," the gentle mannered, little outlaw said. "You wondered why I pitched in on your side, Carter. I—was like you, once. Loved a woman. You two—well, you reminded me of—what I once had to leave behind. I crossed Dilgen, sure. He had it comin' to him. Well—goodby."

Blade Carter put Mary from him. "Wait. I'll be ridin' with you."

Tyson stared. "Why, hombre?"

Carter was rigid. "Reward notices," he said. "The damn' things got a way of followin' a man around."

"Don't be a fool," Tyson counseled, gently. "I've been talking to the Rocking River folks. They need a new man, to take Dilgen's place as combined sheriff an' judge an' all-around boss. Right now, they're electin' you to the job. An' as for the reward dodgers, they'll bother you no more. Them so-called crimes of yours happened so long ago that nobody can touch you for 'em. There's a law, in this state, which says after a certain number of years— Say! You two listenin'!"

THEY were—but not to Tyson. The music of two singing hearts —well, Lace Tyson's talk couldn't compete with that, and he knew it.

So this strange, gentle, somber little man chuckled softly to his horse, and rode on, an oddly happy smile hovering about his mouth.

(Continued From Page 89)

do. I decided I'd run you and your whole crew off this range, and I've run 'em all off except you and Blackie. It's your turn now, and believe me, the only reason I'm giving you the chance to make a run for it is that I didn't want any innocent blood shed around here, so I'm not giving you time to build up a case against yourselves. Otherwise, I'd see you hang; it's better and more certain this way."

Fulton growled, "Marlow, you're always talking in riddles. You don't make sense. And come to think about it, I've only got your word that you *are* Marlow."

"You haven't even got that. I told you that you could call me Marlow, and you took Flecher's letter and read it, and started calling me Marlow."

"So you forged that letter—"

"No, I didn't. Your friend, Fletcher, wrote that letter and gave it to Marlow, and he was on his way to you with it. I bumped into him; we had a little disagreement about where he should go, and I had to shoot him. But as he died, I promised to do him a personal favor, about a daughter he's got that doesn't know about him, and I got him to tell me about how he fitted into this set up. So, when I buried him, I took his letter and brought it on, and you took me in and told me your plans."

"So, you're thinking of horning in on my proposition for yourself, are you? Who the hell do you think you are?"

"Me?" Redfern repeated. "I'm the Deputy U. S. Marshal that they sent down here to check up on you at the request of Bob Hilton. I happened to bump into Marlow and recognize him from a fresh 'wanted' dodger we got from Texas. I started to arrest him; he objected, and we had a fight. So, like I told you, I'd rather drive you out of this country now before anybody else gets killed than to wait till you murder somebody. Do you want to get out now or wait till I make a case against you?"

Fulton was deep in thought, and

(Continued On Page 94)

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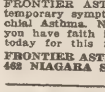

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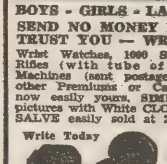

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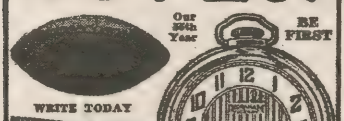

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(Continued From Page 93)

then he came up with his answer. "So you're not Marlow," he mused. You're not the gunman I thought you were. You're just a punk of a tinstar that probably anybody could outshoot—"

HIS TALK was to convince himself, and to warn Blackie Thaw. Thaw got the idea, and his horse seemed to get restless. When he got the animal under control, he had moved some fifteen feet away from Fulton, putting Redfern at the apex of a wide triangle the three men made. That is, he had got into a position to whipsaw Redfern.

Jim Redfern did not miss the significance of this, but he gave no sign of it. "Well, what's your answer?" he asked Fulton.

Fulton slid off his horse. "This!" he snapped, and jerked his weapon.

Redfern had kept his eyes on Fulton's movement as he dismounted, but he knew what that diversion had been intended for. He spun around and faced Blackie Thaw who was just bringing his gun to bear on him. Redfern's own weapon had jumped to his hand, and just before Blackie fired, Redfern's gun roared. The shot knocked Blackie Thaw off his horse, killing him instantly.

Redfern swung back to Fulton just as Fulton's gun cleared leather and came up roaring. But Fulton had been hasty, and in his eageness, his first bullet went low, drilling Redfern's leg. His second bullet would have hit Redfern in the chest if his first one hadn't knocked him to the ground.

Redfern jerked up to a sitting position and lifted his gun. He triggered the weapon just as Fulton's third shot roared out.

Fulton staggered backward against his horse, caught his saddle horn in an effort to stay on his feet. His gun dribbled from his free hand, then his grip on the saddle loosened slowly and he fell to a sitting position on the ground beside his animal. Then he fell over backward and lay there as the two free animals darted away in panic. Fulton

(Continued On Page 95)

RENEGADE'S MOUNTAIN

(Continued From Page 94)

and his gang were no more. The girl came rushing out of the house, followed by the limping old Bob Hilton. And now it was her time to help Jim Redfern up into the chair.

"I'll get some water and dress that wound, Jim," she said solicitously. "You just take it easy."

The old man sat down on the bench beside Jim, his stick making marks on the ground. "We heard what you said, of course," he began, "and we want to thank you for the help. About what I throwed in your face a while ago about being one of Fulton's gunmen—"

"Forget that," Jim Redfern said. "You had a right to believe it; that was what I was trying to make folks around here believe for a while."

"Well, we'd be mighty proud to have you stay here while your leg is getting well," Old Bob said. "We ain't got as nice a place as we had down in Texas, on account I haven't been able to work since the horse throwed me, but you'd be mighty welcome."

"I'll be proud to stay a while," Jim Redfern answered.

He didn't tell the old man just then about the other things he had in his mind; about his years of hiring out before he joined with the law. He had had enough of the law work he had been doing every since he had left home with a bitter resentment at all lawlessness. He was sick of the people it threw him into contact with, sick of evil and of greed and of revenge. And he was still haunted by his dream of the peace that comes at sundown on the lee side of a mountain—the peace that brings a song to the throat.

Here was land to be worked, and old Bob couldn't work it; here was that peace—and that girl with a song on her lips.

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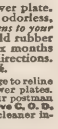

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OUTLAW, RIDE FOR ME!

(Continued From Page 27)

By the time Miranda woke again, it was early morning. Ginnie was sitting in the big room, dozing; the house was in apple-pie order, and everyone else was gone. Miranda wandered around while the coffee cooked, looking for something to do, but Ginnie's eagle eyes had covered every corner, and her capable hands had taken care of every detail.

Out on the porch, watching the sun's rays creep with innocuous deceit across the prairie toward the house, she thought about Leslie Rawlings, and wondered what would happen to him. Nobody was fooled about him, but she knew if Dick Wilson had anything to do with it, they'd let him off just because he'd gone for the doctor...and because she'd spoken for him. She stood on the porch, wondering where he'd go, whether he'd join another gang... or *maybe they won't let him off after all!*

"Pa'don me, ma'am, but I reckon I owed you somethin' an' I left youah hawse where I found 'im."

She turned quickly, and found an outstretched hand pushing a package at her.

"An' then too," he said, and for once his mouth was sober, but his eyes were dancing. "I recollect you-all said somethin' about needin' a hiahed man if you only had the money, an' I thought now that you won youahself that rewahd money, you jes might be in a position to give a poor man a job."

She stared from him to the package.

"Youah oatmeal," he explained.

Miranda still stood staring at him, remembering the moment when she had asked for it, muttering almost under her breath. She remembered the tension of that moment, too, and what had caused it.

He remembered, too. She found that out soon enough. It was a long minute before she could pull away long enough to say demurely, "Why Mr. Rawlings, I'm forgetting my manners. Won't you come in and have some coffee?"

(Continued From Page 61)

hidin', out in th' chaparral."

"Oh, all right! Here's another twenty!" Riggs snarled. "But you don't deserve anything for any of 'em—you wuz gettin' even with old Boone and Winters for stripin' yore back with a blacksnake whip."

"Sure, I paid 'em back, damn their souls! But it's kinda nice to gouge money out of a dirty rat like you for doin' it!" He glared at Riggs within a foot of his face. "Now, damn you, give me all th' money you've got with you! I saw you empty your safe yesterday. You've got every cent on you that you ever stole off'n this range, and by damn I aim to take it! Must be most nigh a couple hundred thousand dollars in money, bonds, what-not!"

"You damned old blackmailer!" Riggs jerked his gun from his holster and fired twice. As the old man swayed before the crashing bullets, he tried to strike with his shovel. Too late; the strength seeped out of his body and slowly he tumbled face first into the newly dug grave.

"All right, Riggs!" Boone's voice was low, harsh.

Riggs didn't move. His back was toward Boone and he was pondering his chances of wheeling and firing.

"Turn around, Riggs," Boone said, his voice little more than a purr. "With your hands up—or on your guns. I don't care which way you make it."

Riggs wheeled. One hand came up with the gun that had just killed the old scoundrel Reegan, the other clawed for the gun on his left hip. Boone pulled the trigger of his own weapon. Riggs' upcoming hand stopped as if it had struck something solid. He fired—into the ground. His other hand was still clawing for the gun on his left hip as he fell upon the dirt mound beside the grave.

BOONE opened a traveling bag sitting near-by beneath a cedar bush and examined the contents—old Reegan had been right, for there were the banknotes, bonds, and other securities that represented the theft of Madrone Range. Closing the bag, he picked it up and walked down the lanes of tombstones to the cemetery gate. Somehow the air felt more wholesome beyond that fence.

"Bill, I'm riding home."

Boone looked up into Neva Winters' hazel eyes. There was not the slightest hint of the tiger there. He nodded, glanced around at the riders who rode with her.

"I'm leaving some of my hands to help with—with things," the girl went on.

"I have told Lig Starr to bring your men over to our bunkhouse, seeing as how there isn't any more Circle B headquarters. It was a horrible mistake, that burning, and I'm wondering—" She paused, turned to her riders. "You boys might as well go on. I'll be along later." And when they were out of hearing, "Bill, the Boxed W's been mighty lonesome since Father died." She looked him squarely in the eyes.

"I'm going back to town," Boone spoke evenly, though his heart was beating double time, "to turn this bag over to the banker and—get just three things. Then I'll be coming out to the Boxed W."

"Three things?"

"Yes, three things—my horse—"

"Oh?" Her voice had a tremor of disappointment to it. She flicked her quirt idly against her saddle horn.

"My horse," Boone went on, wondering even then if he was ever going to get the words out. He repeated, "My horse—a marriage license and a preacher!"

"Oh!" she exclaimed, her voice rich and thrilling, suspiciously near a choke. A wave of color pulsated across her cheeks and her eyes flashed. She struck her horse a sound smack in the flank. The next moment she was galloping full tilt after her riders, her hair glinting with the gold of the morning sun.

Boone swung about, whistling, and headed for Madrone. He stopped short, scratched through his mussed, red hair. Slowly he retraced his steps and thoughtfully closed the cemetery gate.

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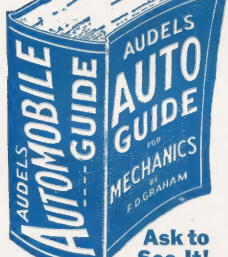

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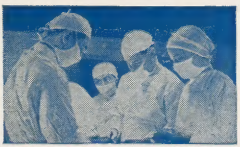

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